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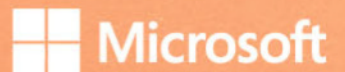
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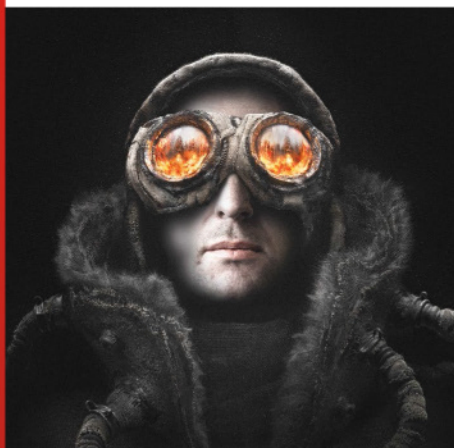
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"FROSTPUNK WAS A GRIPPING SURVIVAL STRATEGY CLASSIC"



The original *Frostpunk* was a gripping survival strategy classic. Its maker, 11 Bit Studios, delivered an engaging gaming experience where incredibly difficult choices were necessary to ensure New London, the last vestige of civilisation, didn't fall to the frozen desolation of the Great Storm. Now 11 Bit is back with not just a far more expansive sequel, but one that has

ROBERT JONES

Twitter

@rnicholasj

This month

Went drinking with Cutter Slade on Adelpha. Talked about dad stuff, like raising unruly daughters, how Talan FC always try and walk it in, and why commuting via jetpack is crucial to beat the ratrun.

evolved to ask fundamentally different questions. Such as, with the Great Storm now survived and the fires of New London still burning, how would the society that is thawing into existence be managed?

ROBERT JONES

PRINT EDITOR

robert.jones@futurenet.com

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The PC Gamer team

**ROBIN VALENTINE**

Twitter

@robinvalentine

This month

Played *Balatro*, *Slay the Spire* and *Cobalt Core* so much that he started speaking in card hands.

**SARAH JAMES**

Twitter

@vision_burn

This month

Created a murderous *Elden Ring* dream team with the smelliest of all companions, Dung Eater.

**SEAN MARTIN**

Twitter

@RemainsToBeSean

This month

Defended Super Earth from galactic terrors by diving harder than any Helldiver has ever dived.

**PHIL IWANIUK**

Twitter

@Phillwaniuk

This month

Finally realised that bathing his GPU in cheetah blood doesn't make it faster. Oh Phil.

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Contents

#396
JUNE 2024

SUBSCRIBE TO
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Monitor

08 THE TOP STORY

Valve's raking in the cash

10 THE SPY

New gaming rumours investigated

12 SPECIAL REPORT

How a group of PC gamers built a record-breaking factory in *Factorio*

14 SECRET LEVEL

Sergii Greben on programming AI for NPCs

16 INCOMING

The hottest games to get excited for

Previews

18 Vindictus – Defying Fate

22 Mouse

26 Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes

32 Level Zero: Extraction

Features

38 Frostpunk 2

48 Unreal Tournament 2004

58 The Elder Scrolls Online

38



18

38 FROSTPUNK 2

Rick Lane visits 11 Bit Studios in Warsaw, Poland, to get the inside scoop on *Frostpunk 2*, the exciting new society management and survival game.

48 UNREAL TOURNAMENT

Kyle Hoekstra delivers a fascinating deep dive into the legacy of iconic FPS *Unreal Tournament 2004*.

58 THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

Dominic Tarason speaks with the ESO dev team as the MMO celebrates its tenth anniversary.





48



58



66



94



124

66 DRAGON'S DOGMA 2

Fraser Brown spends more than 100 hours reviewing the first massive fantasy RPG of 2024!

94 ERGONOMIC KEYBOARDS

Nick Evanson goes fingers-on with six of the best ergonomic keyboards money can buy.

124 GRIM FANDANGO

Ian Evenden reinstalls the legendary LucasArts point-and-click detective noir adventure.

Reviews

66 Dragon's Dogma 2

72 Star Wars:
Dark Forces Remaster

74 Outcast – A New Beginning

78 Classified France '44

82 Horizon Forbidden West

FREE GAMES

86 Lee Carvalho's
Putting Challenge 2

87 20 Small Mazes

87 Phsychopomp

THEY'RE BACK

88 FEAR

89 Phasmophobia

89 Pac-Man
Championship Edition DX

Hardware

94 GROUP TEST

100 TECHREPORT

102 TECH TALES

104 BUYER'S GUIDE

Extra Life

108 NOW PLAYING

Elden Ring, *FFXIII: Lightning Returns*,
Hairdresser Simulator, *Evil West*.

112 UPDATE

Ted Litchfield dives into *Armored Core VI*'s explosive post-launch PvP.

114 MOD SPOTLIGHT

A *Scholar of the First Sin*-style total conversion mod for *Elden Ring*.

116 HOWTO

Top tips and tricks to get started and then master *Helldivers 2*.

118 DIARY

Starfield astro-rogue Jett Johnson faces his final mission. Can he make bank?

122 WHY I LOVE

Discovering killer builds in roguelike deckbuilders like *Balatro*.

124 REINSTALL

Classic point-and-click detective noir game *Grim Fandango* replayed.

128 MUST PLAY

Baldur's Gate III, *XCOM 2*, *Vanquish*, *Sega Bass Fishing*, *Dungeons & Dragons: Chronicles of Mystara*, *A Short Hike*, *Demon's Tilt*, *Castlevania: Lords of Shadow 2*.

MONITOR

NEWS | OPINION | DEVELOPMENT



GABE'S FORTUNE

VALVE prints more money per head than Apple and Facebook

Back in 2021, indie developer Wolfire filed an antitrust lawsuit against Valve that accused the gaming giant of anti-competitive business practices – including its habit of taking unfair cuts from developers on its store. Valve's 30% fees have come under criticism before – and they are high when compared to some other online platforms. Valve offers cuts, but only if your company's earning millions on millions – no alms for the little guy.

The suit was dismissed without prejudice later that year. However,

that dismissal gave Wolfire 30 days to bring the suit up-to-par, which it did, reigniting the legal battle in 2022.

Now, details have emerged from the suit's discovery phase – both sides' legal teams were able to exchange documents to help build out their cases. One particular email chain between Valve employees stood

DETAILS HAVE EMERGED FROM THE SUIT'S DISCOVERY PHASE

out, though. Turns out, Valve was making more money per head than just about anybody.

VALVE-TIME IS MONEY

The heavily redacted emails confirm that in 2018, Valve was perhaps the most efficient big tech company. "Since I like to fiddle with numbers, I brought net income into this comparison," writes Valve's Kristan Miller, "...breaking these numbers down as net income/hour/employee shows some interesting comparisons." Miller proceeded to compare the company's net income (post-expenses cash) per hour, divided by its number of employees

ANYTHING YOU CAN DO

I CAN DO BETTER



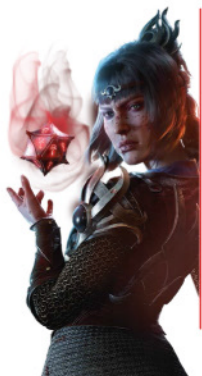
How tough could it be to create high-performance computer chips from scratch? The biggest tech firms in the world struggle to keep up. Yet Tesla could do it, according to Elon Musk. We can't hold him to that, however, as he says, "I sure hope we don't have to." ■JR

GAME BLAME

A WIZARD DIDN'T DO IT



Larian is done with *BG III*, and fans are ready to say it's D&D owner Wizards of the Coast's fault. But wait: Larian CEO Swen Vincke said he's read our angry Reddit threads and wants to make something clear, "WOTC is not responsible for us taking a different direction." ■JW



TOP STRATS

THE TRUTH IS OUT



In the lead-up to *Stardew Valley*'s 1.6 launch, developer Eric Barone shared tons of facts and tidbits about the cosy farming sim. One of which confirmed a long-held belief that it really is faster to harvest crops from left-to-right rather than right-to-left, 100ms faster to be exact. ■EG



MAIN: I figured out where Gabe gets his yacht funds.

TOP: Pictured: A gaggle of nerds about to make more money than god.

(then 350). "This ratio gives a good idea of how much revenue 'survives to the end' for each of these businesses." Comparisons are made between companies like Apple, Microsoft and Facebook. While redactions mean you can't actually see how far ahead of the pack Valve was, it was still top dog. "Plot twist: again, we are an outlier."

Earlier in the chain, an annual comparison bore out the same results – meaning that, in 2018, Valve was raking in over \$780,400 net income per employee based on Facebook's second-place numbers – while Apple came in third place with \$476,160. Granted, the architecture of businesses will shift this number around a lot – and this is a measure of raw efficiency rather than volume.

Still, it's proof that Valve does an obscene amount with very little. Whether the situation has changed over the past six years is unclear but unlikely, considering Valve hasn't exactly changed its business model and it's continued to move from strength to strength.

Steam's absurd efficiency could be a product of penny-pinching from indie devs, but it's just as likely we're watching a well-oiled machine continue to belch out cash. Still – to take Zuckerbeg to task when it comes to money is jaw-dropping, and a reminder that the industry is massive, which makes the layoffs more grim. ■

Harvey Randall

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Bigger, better Stardew

Stardew Valley's 1.6 patch has dropped and it's massive.

Diablo IV.1

Diablo IV's fourth season is coming, bringing widespread changes that look set to revive the game.

No bots allowed

Helldivers 2 players achieved a major victory, comprehensively wiping out the Automaton menace across the galaxy. But is it really over?

Cursed Relic

Days after Sega let it go, Relic announced layoffs to give itself "the best possible chance to survive".

Game passed

Devs say "the gold rush is over". Big Game Pass and Epic exclusive deals have dried up for indie studios.

Dragon's D'ohgma

Dragon's Dogma 2 is a great game, but initial Steam reviews tanked due to its pointless microtransactions and poor optimisation.

LOWS



The Spy

■ BUT WHO WATCHES THE SPY?

The Spy doesn't believe in money. Sure, The Spy has seen the coins and notes you parade around, and heard tell of their ability to be exchanged for a Greggs Steak Bake. The Spy understands these coins and notes are then gathered up and given to the people who make and hand out the Steak Bakes – presumably so, they too, can go on to secure their own supply of Steak Bakes. It all seems very circuitous and unnecessary. To The Spy's knowledge, seagulls have never mastered currency. And yet The Spy has observed that they are very good at acquiring Steak Bakes.

And this is just your basic, ground level economics – the thing designed in a way that your average beef-craving Joe can understand. It says nothing of the frankly terrifying design that is high-level finance. As far as The Spy can tell, the stock market is built on a foundation of intangibles – the atmospheric shift when a butterfly flaps its wings, the tortured moan of a Victorian ghost, the weary sigh when a staff writer hits publish on a new article in the CMS.

In late March, for instance, Kotaku claimed – citing anonymous sources at Rockstar – that *GTA VI* production was behind schedule, and that its release window could potentially slip into 2026. As a result, the stock price of Take-Two Interactive, Rockstar's owner, dropped by 5.2%. Days later, Kotaku updated its article, clarifying matters after speaking to some more sources. The new information sounds less drastic: at one point, it seems, an early-2025 release date was planned – matching hints Take-Two CEO Strauss Zelnick made to investors last year. Now, Kotaku claims, that is no longer possible. Instead, the new target is said to be autumn 2025 – although Kotaku notes there is still the “possibility” of a further delay. Since the update, Take-Two's share price has slowly started to rise again.

HAPPINESS IN SAVOURY

Two things lend credence to the idea that *GTA VI* is behind schedule. First, it is a videogame, and have you seen how hard those are to make? It's honestly a wonder

any get released ever. Second, a Bloomberg report claimed that Rockstar was mandating employees return to offices full-time. That could suggest that project milestones are being missed, although it seems the uptick in leaks ahead of last year's trailer debut is the bigger reason.

What can we learn from all this? At best, nothing. At worst, *something*, but a version of something that is actually wrong and thus less useful than if we'd learned

nothing. The Spy isn't disputing that *GTA VI* is probably behind schedule.

The Spy would be entirely unsurprised to learn that *GTA* could fall into 2026. What The Spy takes issue with is that this information should be enough to panic investors. Is *GTA VI* – the sequel to a game released 11 years ago – less desirable or potentially profitable if it releases in

2026? Will the extra year be enough to persuade gamers that they don't feel like buying the anticipated follow-up to the second best-selling videogame of all time? Has anything changed, or are investors happy to be swayed by the shifting of the winds – like birds, but without even the good sense to focus on tangibles and Steak Bakes? ■

The Spy



THE SPY

The Spy is paid exclusively in savoury pastries.



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Special Report

PCG INVESTIGATES



THE GOD FACTORY

A group of players built a record-breaking plant

Over 160 copies of *Factorio*, a base building game from four years ago, ran simultaneously on servers around the world to make history. *Factorio*'s first 'God Factory' was born through the efforts of a Discord server full of people who refuse to stop building.

The over 400 players behind Eternity Cluster, a project that had only existed for a month at the time, broke 1,000,000 science per minute (SPM) in February. Normal players of the factory-building automation game only need around 30 SPM to achieve the game's ultimate goal: sending a rocket into space. But for the *Factorio* players who really get a thrill from efficient mass production – a drive that has kept the game relevant since its 2018 Steam early access launch – one rocket is not enough.

"The most difficult obstacle has been not burning out working on the project," said Hornwitser, one of the organisers. Hornwitser spent all of February working on *Clusterio*, the *Factorio* mod holding all of this together. Without it, the God Factory wouldn't exist.

"*Factorio* is a very well optimised game and most players will never find themselves hitting the limits," said GreatSymphonia, who's contributed an actual physical server to the project. "We are."

Factorio has a single, persistent villain that prevents normal megabases from reaching anything close to 1M SPM. The game has an updates per second (UPS) maximum that limits how many *Factorio* machines can run at once. Exceed the UPS limit and your SPM readings break because the game can't handle more calculations. This isn't a problem for normal players, but it's a threat for megabase builders shooting for big numbers.

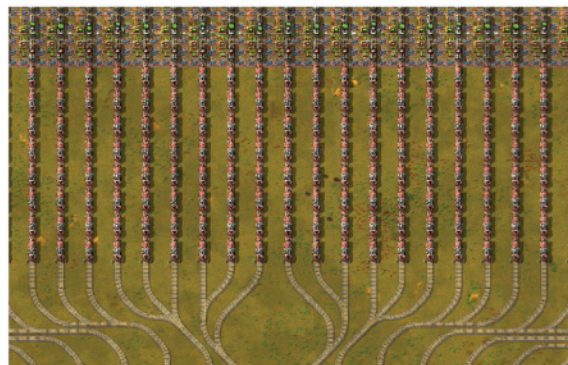
Clusterio lets you run multiple instances of *Factorio* as if they were one gigantic base. Each instance of the game still has to abide by the UPS limit, but all the bases working in tandem come together to form one giant machine. The achievement is as much a win for the folks with Eternity Cluster as it is for *Clusterio*'s ability to perform at such a massive scale.

Over 400 players joined at least one of Eternity Cluster's *Factorio* servers. "The key part of such a big event is seeing the community share ideas," GreatSymphonia said. "Most of the people behind the organisation of that event have a career in IT system administration or programming. A huge proportion of *Factorio* players are people that love to think through logistics problems and optimise designs. It's very nice to see the community share its designs, its ideas, to always make more efficient solutions to the same simple problem: making more science."



Rocket science

Factorio players chase high amounts of science per minute (SPM) for the challenge. It's a metric for measuring the total output of a base built purely to see how efficient you can make it. Most factories only hit 30 SPM, but megabases can go way higher. Before the God Factory, the record was 300K SPM.



FAR LEFT: The EU server was packed with over 30 players on day one.

LEFT: Grafana tracks all the materials used in this huge factory.

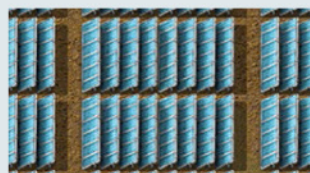
BUILDING BLOCKS *The God Factory's most important machines*



IRON SMELTERS
Iron smelters are the building blocks of any *Factorio* base and thus crucial to the God Factory.



SCIENCE LABS
The labs take the science packs and unlock new tech or improve existing ones.



SOLAR PANELS
Millions of solar panels power the God Factory for their low updates per second.



ROCKETS
Rockets are the end goal of the game, but you need them to make every science type.

ETERNITY CLUSTER

Throughout February, members of Eternity Cluster monitored their production stats using the wall of graphs and numbers on their dedicated Grafana page – an open-source service for tracking server data. A *Clusterio* plugin is able to track the exchange of resources and feed them to Grafana, translating every grid of *Factorio*'s pixel art conveyor belts and factories into raw numbers. You can see graphs for the over 50 million iron ore the cluster is creating and consuming every minute, or all 554 GBs of memory it uses. All this information helped steer the project toward its weekly SPM milestones.

If the cluster was running low on resources or running into UPS issues, an organiser would make the call on what needed to be done. Most problems could be fixed with minor redesigns, more bases, or server-side bug fixes. But some problems, like tropical cyclone Kirrily that recently caused power outages on the northeast coast of Australia, where some of the physical servers are located, were completely out of their hands. Thankfully, luck and backup power kept the Eternity Cluster safe from the power outages.

Scrolling through the Discord server's general chat as The God Factory hit 1M SPM was like overhearing chatter in the weirdest NASA control room you've ever seen. "Sped up Solar 5 expansion by enabling path cache." "Blue circuit 01 is basically at max capacity." "Acid is bottlenecking yellow." "We have too much purple."

Eventually, the crew got all the science pack colours under control and broke 1M SPM. You'd think it would've

been time to celebrate and bask in the historic achievement, but the conversation slipped right back into the optimisations needed to go even bigger. To *Factorio* players at this level, a world record SPM is merely evidence that you can science harder.

Every Eternity Cluster member repeated the motto that every *Factorio* player learns sooner or later, no matter how ambitious their goals are: the factory must grow.

"The factory Eternity Cluster must grow,"

Cooldude2602, one of the *Clusterio* mod developers, said.

Clusterio is still in alpha and the team had to make "a lot of compromises" for it to work, they said. "The ultimate goal will be to have *Clusterio* released with a wide range of plugins to allow people to host more events like Eternity cluster seamlessly and at any scale or customisations they want."

The Eternity Cluster Discord server has around 177 people in it and

more continue to join every day to ask how they can help. "All are welcome," the information channel says. And given the dedication and teamwork I've seen there, I expect two million won't be that far off.

"I don't consider myself an expert player, and feel like I'm among those with the least expertise," Bubba-yo, another one of the members, said. "It was pretty hard to resist getting involved in this project for that reason. But everything about it has been great. *Factorio* is normally a pretty wonderful community, and this group has been a real delight to hang around with. This is gaming at its finest, in my opinion." ■

Tyler Colp

**"ACID IS
BOTTLENECKING
YELLOW." "WE HAVE
TOO MUCH PURPLE"**

BEST BEHAVIOUR

Donkey Crew's lead gameplay developer, **SERGII GREBEN**, on programming AI for NPCs

Sergii Greben's path into game development is an interesting one. Having worked in a web development job for a few years, and finding that this failed to give him much satisfaction, he joined a group of passionate *Mount & Blade* modders; a group that soon blossomed into its own developer, Donkey Crew.

In the early days of the company, when things leaned more towards a group of enthusiasts rather than a professional team, he could essentially choose whatever he wanted to work on – and chose AI for human NPCs. “I was just trying to make them behave a little bit more like actual humans,” says Greben. “It’s all about iteration. Just try playing it. See what doesn’t work, what feels off, try to fix it. Try again, and so on, until it gets better.”

That was almost ten years ago. Now working on DC's third game, *Bellwright*, Greben still applies the same fundamental approach – only now, the scope is much wider. The latest title is an ambitious project with strategy, survival and city building elements. There's combat, but also more complicated NPC behaviours such as crafting and harvesting. They also need food and sleep. How do characters in this world prioritise?

“It’s a pretty complicated system underneath,” says Greben, “[we call it] a job priority system. Any activity that needs to be performed, whether it’s bringing material from one place to another, or performing some construction etc – is a job that’s registered on a system, and an NPC gets assigned to it. Now it’s his job, he does it until he switches to another.”

While you might expect the ‘jobs’ to vary wildly in programming difficulty, that’s not necessarily true. “It’s all very simple at the very basic level, and it all becomes very complex when you’re trying to make them look like real human beings. When you’re trying to make them stop, talk to each other. Pause in what they’re doing. That all becomes very complicated.”

AI AI OH

A few options were considered for NPC material gathering – including having simple representations within the player’s camp, such as a woodcutter’s tent and a woodcutter NPC, with the gathered material popping into existence there – but

instead, these NPCs will act just as the player would themselves. This mimicking human behaviour can create a more immersive world, but it can also result in unexpected side effects during development.

Greben received reports of villages completely empty, with the NPCs far from home for no apparent reason. “It turned out that they became hungry,” he explains. “They became hungry and they went out searching for food.” Then there were the hunters who couldn’t quite finish the job when hunting wolves. “He tracks the wolf, and he gets close to the wolf. Then he starts shooting... and of course, it turns out that he gets scared. Wolves scare your villagers, and so he saw the wolf, and now he’s running away.”

Unpredictable AI behaviour is inevitable during development, and it’s a reminder that – like everything else when it comes to making games – it’s far from straightforward. “The goal is not to have the most realistic or the most human-like AI,” Greben explains. “In some cases it needs to be realistic, and in some cases it needs to be more predictable. So when you go into the village, you know that you can find some characters that can give you quests, and [they aren’t] away in the forest searching for food.”

Greben points out that AI doesn’t exist in isolation, and connects directly to other parts of game design. One side of development will have a direct impact on the other. Donkey Crew handles this by having four people involved in AI, but none dedicated solely to that role. Most importantly of all, “Making the AI good for gameplay, and making the AI smart – those are different things.” ■

Luke Kemp

NPCs WE SAW

Some memorable examples of AI in games



FEAR

Despite being 20 years old, *FEAR* boasts enemies acting smarter than those in many games.



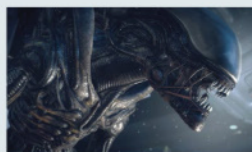
FORZA HORIZON 5

The *Forza* games use divatars, their behaviour pulling from the actions of players.



LEFT 4 DEAD

L4D famously makes use of an AI director to orchestrate enemy and pickup spawns.



ALIEN ISOLATION

The Alien AI is crucial to the experience, gauged perfectly to ramp up the tension.

UNPREDICTABLE AI BEHAVIOUR IS INEVITABLE DURING DEVELOPMENT



Deers, at least, probably never sent hunters fleeing in terror.



ABOVE: Don't worry, *Bellwright* will let you kill humans as well as animals.

LEFT: *Bellwright* will have town building elements as well as the various AI interactions.



1 month



HOMEWORLD 3

RELEASE May 13, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Blackbird Interactive

Finally, after multiple large delays, the third game in the beloved sci-fi RTS series blasts off in mid-May. Our preview of the game was very promising, so keep the faith.



SENUA'S SAGA: HELLBLADE II

RELEASE May 21, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Ninja Theory

The sequel to the award-winning original *Hellblade*, *Senua's Saga* sees Senua return in a brutal journey of survival through Viking Iceland. Violent and crazy.

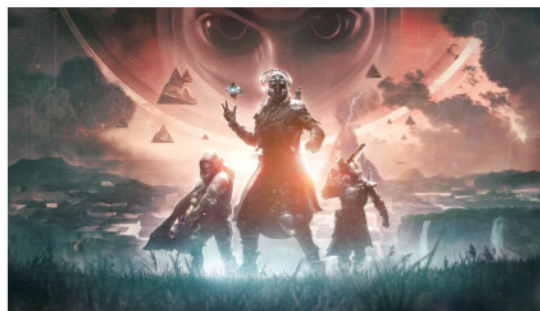


CROWN WARS: THE BLACK PRINCE

RELEASE May 23, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Artefacts Studio

Medieval tactics and strategy where you play the lord of your domain and fight to crush the malevolent plans of the evil Order in brutal turn-based combat.

3 months



DESTINY 2: THE FINAL SHAPE

RELEASE June 4, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** Bungie

The Final Shape promises to carry gamers on an epic journey to end the War of Light and Darkness. It's already looking better than *Lightfall*, so one to keep an eye on.



ELDEN RING: SHADOW OF THE ERDTREE

RELEASE June 20, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** FromSoftware Inc

What's looking like the biggest release of the year, the *Elden Ring* expansion appears to be a must-buy for fans. New enemies, weapons, bosses and more incoming.

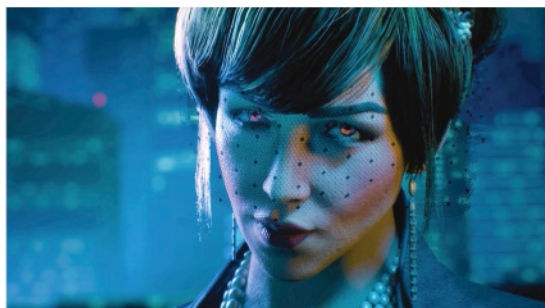


FROSTPUNK 2

RELEASE July 25, 2024 | **DEVELOPER** 11 bit studios

The hit dystopian society survival game *Frostpunk* returns with a bigger and more ambitious sequel. Grim, difficult decisions and deep strategy await the player.

6 months



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - BLOODLINES 2

RELEASE Autumn 2024 | DEVELOPER Paradox Interactive

With its original developer binned off in 2021, *Bloodlines 2* now rises once more from *Everybody's Gone to the Rapture* dev The Chinese Room. Looks promising.



STALKER 2: HEART OF CHORNOBYL

RELEASE September 5, 2024 | DEVELOPER GSC Game World

The long-delayed *STALKER 2* has slipped again to early September this year. But from what we've played so far the wait is going to be well worth it.

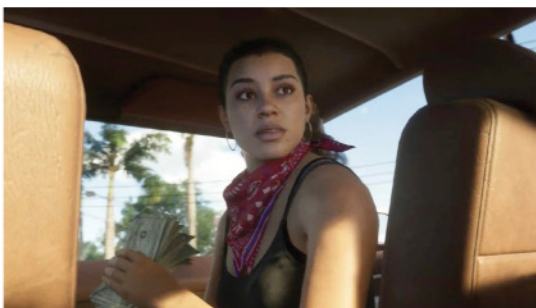


WARHAMMER 40,000: SPACE MARINE 2

RELEASE September 9, 2024 | DEVELOPER Saber Interactive

Saber Interactive has been given a full extra year to make sure that Titus' return against the relentless Tyranid hordes will be a triumphant one.

12 months+



GTA VI

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Rockstar Studios

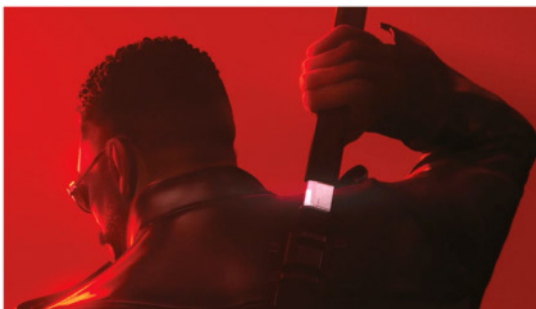
Everything we're hearing right now points to the next *Grand Theft Auto* launching in 2025. But whether or not that includes PC is unknown. Better get saving for a new GPU.



MONSTER HUNTER WILDS

RELEASE 2025 | DEVELOPER Capcom

The famous virtual monster hunting series returns once more in 2025, promising the "pinnacle of excellence in hunting action gameplay".



BLADE

RELEASE Unknown | DEVELOPER Arkane Lyon

From the talented devs who brought PC gamers both *Prey* and the *Dishonored* series, Marvel's daywalker is set for a mature, singleplayer, third-person adventure game.

BROKEN ROADS RESURFACES

We've had serious hype for the Australia-set post-apocalypse RPG from Drop Bear Bytes, so when it was delayed late last year, it was disappointing. Luckily, though, by the time you read this the game should be out, with a new release date of April 10 recently announced. Keep your eyes peeled for PC Gamer's full review in our next issue.



PREVIEW



Vindictus: Defying Fate



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
TBADEVELOPER
NexonPUBLISHER
NexonLINK
s.team/c/2814860VINDICTUS:
DEFYING FATEEnjoy a spin-off from a
long-running Korean MMO

What were you doing in 2010? Chances are you weren't playing a Korean MMO called *Vindictus*, also known as *Mabinogi Heroes*, which won the grand prize at the 2010 Korea Game Awards. It's still going today, has been praised for its combat, and *Defying Fate* is a spin-off story.

A warrior enters a sunlit valley. She wears highly feminised armour that's a little draughty around the thighs, and carries a sword and shield. A dual-blade wielding male character is also available at startup, but the extra protection will probably come in handy later, especially when I start looking at the alternate costumes.

The game is full of artefacts from its MMO heritage. *Defying Fate* takes place in the same universe as the original *Vindictus*, features some of its characters and you can swap costumes at any time, as well as perform emotes which, in a singleplayer game, appear somewhat redundant but might hint at a future co-op implementation. The outfits for the female character, Fiona, range from some serious armour with horns and a surcoat to a little white dress straight out of a Twitter bot's photo library, and everything seems to come with high heels. Even her metal boots end in stilettos that somehow still allow their wearer to walk over mud without sinking

in. Oddly, the male character, Lann, doesn't suffer from this problem, as while he has fewer outfits available they're all sensible, sturdy armour rather than mankinis or low-rise denim shorts.

Still, Fiona's handy with a sword, and that's lucky as this is an action RPG that takes a big leaf out of FromSoft's book. Almost immediately, having killed the first of many roaming gnolls – wolf or hyena-like creatures who stand on their hind legs, use crude weapons and are all over the game's artwork – you're presented with a glowing thing that shoots a beam into the air so it can be seen from far away. Interact, and it becomes a checkpoint you can rest at to restore health and respawn at when you die.

Enemies patrol up and down like in an MMO, and can be aggro'd from quite a long distance. Their arrows will pass through gaps in cover, while melee units charge at you, so it's quite easy to get swamped if you're not careful. This leads to a cautious style of combat in which you attempt to pull one away without bringing the rest down on you too. The fights are not to be rushed into, and I found that dual-wielder Lann was a better choice at the beginning even though he can't block. Fiona can, as you might expect from that shield, and there's a button dedicated to it, marking a strong

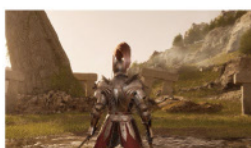
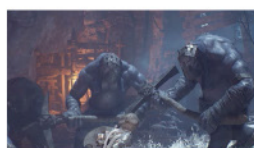
PLAYED
IT

difference between the two characters' fighting styles. She also seems to be the harder character to fight with, as while she doesn't appear to be any faster than Lann she doesn't hit so hard, but her dodge is more acrobatic and her block essential. In the original MMO, the player character was a mercenary who joined up with a group to battle monsters, but here it seems you're very much on your own.

PLAYERS OF GAMES

Fiona and Lann also play very slightly different games. After squeezing through a crack in a rock, Lann finds himself immediately at the mercy of a miniboss, while Fiona, doing the same thing, is left unhindered to run through the arena before facing off against a different miniboss a little later. It's also clear that there are other humans in this world, but that they're having a bad time against the gnolls.

**YOU CAN SWAP COSTUMES
AT ANY TIME, AS WELL AS
PERFORM EMOTES**

Vindictus: Defying Fate

✖ Character models are very nicely detailed, the switch to the Unreal Engine from the MMO's Source allowing them a fluidity of movement and providing some sharply defined stonework, brightly sunlit exteriors and suitably atmospheric caves full of flickering firelight and piles of skulls. The game has a Celtic influence seen in the patterns etched on standing stones around the outside areas and is capable of presenting some attractive vistas.

The bad guys are, however, extremely grey and brown and lacking in contrast, and the detail can be hard to make out as a result. It's not until I reach Lann's first named miniboss, Shadowfang, that I get to really appreciate the amount of work that's gone into the enemy models thanks to a short cutscene. And of course Shadowfang has a huge health bar that my best moves only chip away at. He also lofts the kind of club he can knock chunks out of the earth with.

You may have stepped into this world at the beginning of the game with no apparent backstory, but you're far from helpless. Not only are you armed and armoured but you're equipped with flasks of red health potion and plenty of moves.

Two attacks, a jump and a dodge are mapped to the controller face buttons and if you hold the left bumper additional moves become available on cooldown. Injure a bad guy enough and you can perform a finisher with a trigger-pull once an icon appears on the screen. If these moves are upgradable, along with new weapons and even magic, then this could blossom into a deep combat system with plenty of room for combos. Basic move chains are shown to you in a guide found in the settings, but these are unlikely to be the whole story.

Even with all this at your disposal, the combat is hard, the *Souls* influence coming to the fore once more, and you need to be familiar with your moves and combos before you take on packs of enemies. There's no difficulty slider, although some initial sluggishness was improved by increasing the camera speed and switching DLSS from Quality mode to Balanced to increase the framerate. Weirdly, Nvidia's overlay refused to display a framerate figure, preferring instead to

show 'N/A', but the game was playable in 4K at Ultra settings on an RTX 3080 once I'd tweaked DLSS.

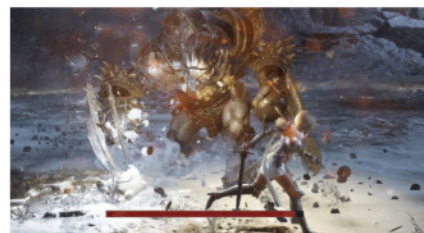
PAUSE FOR THOUGHT

There are other quirks to the game that hint at its MMO heritage. Drinking a health potion also takes a few seconds, during which you're vulnerable to a hit, so they're really only useful for top-ups between fights. Opening Settings or the photo mode doesn't pause the action, meaning you're likely to be hit during a costume change, and the minimap shows a line of red chevrons to highlight the approved path through an area. Though it gives the impression of being an open world there's not much actual exploration to do, and you're really being funnelled through outdoor corridors and battle arenas. So keen is it that you know where to go next, that the only exit to one early save point is highlighted in yellow paint and has a white dot floating over it.

This is obviously not a bad thing, as there's little more tedious in a game than circling around the same maze of passageways or rock-lined crucibles hunting for the exit, but it would be nice if there was something to discover off the beaten path. The demo begins in what appear to be the ruins of an abbey or cathedral, and you'll be drawn to explore them. But there's nothing there, not an extra health potion, useless sword or mouldy carrot. There are some pots scattered around, but smashing them offers up nothing. To be fair to the developers, there are also treasure chests with a 'work in progress' sign over them, so this is where new items or a yet-to-be implemented currency is likely to be found in future. Given that the MMO features a lot more characters than just Lann and Fiona, it's possible we could end up playing as brawler Karok or leather-clad battlewitch Arisha too, which would deepen the combat options even further.

What I've been playing is, it must be underlined, a pre-alpha gameplay test for the game. There's no guarantee good old Shadowfang and his vulpine pals will make it to the final release, and there's also no indication of when that might be. What we have so far is a serviceable and good-looking action RPG with potential in its combat system and the backing of years of accumulated MMO lore, but whether this can be pulled together into the kind of game that makes players give up on *Elden Ring* or *Sekiro* remains to be seen.

Ian Evenden



THE DEMO BEGINS IN WHAT APPEAR TO BE THE RUINS OF AN ABBEY OR CATHEDRAL



ABOVE: See? There are less sexualised clothing options.

LEFT: Taking down monsters much larger than you is the order of the day.



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2025

DEVELOPER
Fumi Games

PUBLISHER
PlaySide Publishing

LINK
fumigames.com

MOUSE

Gangster mice, finger guns and classic rubber hose animation

It's becoming increasingly difficult to make a splash among a sea of game announcements. An estimated 14,000-plus games were released on Steam alone in 2023, with that number only expected to rise in the years to come. To combat this, one indie developer has already attracted the attention of millions by looking to the past for inspiration.

Mouse, a new first-person shooter that utilises the 'rubber hose' animation style of the 1930s, has seen massive interest since early development footage surfaced online. Developed by Warsaw-based Fumi Games, players control a private detective who battles their way through a chaotic city full of criminal rodents, utilising an assortment of cartoon-like weapons to stamp out the corrupt politicians. Unsurprisingly, a lot of the studio's roots stem from animation with Fumi Games CEO and co-founder Mateusz Michalak spending 15 years in the industry.

"We were trying to break into game development, but the main trigger was the pandemic," he tells me in interview. "Many contracts were suspended or cancelled in the animation industry. That's when the idea to seriously enter game development emerged." Michalak still operates Fumi Studio, which creates artistic animations for short films. It's only by accident that the initial idea for *Mouse* came about.

"The first prototype was created in Godot, where the player shot at gangster mice," he says. "It was pretty basic but it

PLAYED
IT

gave us an idea of what the game could be like." *Mouse* has certainly evoked a distinct flavour, taking off after a programmer uploaded a video to TikTok.

SOCIAL BOOM

That social media post would be the first of many that brought eyes to *Mouse*. Most notably, IGN uploaded a teaser in May 2023 that accumulated more than 3 million views, while a TikTok video of gameplay in December of that same year went on to be watched by upwards of 5.5 million times. PlaySide Publishing revealed upon its signing of the developer that the same trailer had been viewed by "tens of millions of fans, earned global coverage across the largest games media outlets in the world, and been highlighted by some of the most influential creators" on the web. It's hard to deny that the art style didn't help its appeal.

"The 1930s are a profoundly fascinating period when it comes to culture, music, events and film," Fumi Games' art producer Grzegorz Pamula says. "They encapsulate many intriguing elements, sparking the imagination and serving as a wellspring of inspiration." The studio "couldn't imagine" anything other than taking advantage of the rubber hose art style.

"Not only does it highlight our brutal world's grotesque elements, but it also allows us to depict its problems in a cartoonish, caricatured way," Pamula continues. "All the while holding true to our theme of a hero in an unjust world."

FULL STEAM AHEAD

At first glance, many people naturally made comparisons to *Steamboat Willie* – which entered the public domain in January 2024 – for similarities to the lead character. With that you'd be forgiven for thinking the property rights were integral to the game's existence, however, the studio says otherwise.

"I'd say he's taking more inspiration from Humphrey Bogart's on-screen achievements and Raymond Chandler's novels, rather than *Steamboat Willie*," explains lead producer Maciej Krzemień. "Yes, it is a game about mice and yes, it uses a rubber hose art style, but if you take a closer look, you will notice that the game has a distinct style of its own."



MANY PEOPLE NATURALLY MADE COMPARISONS TO STEAMBOAT WILLIE



ABOVE: "Say hello to my little friend."

LEFT: "Put 'em up!"

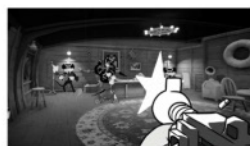
PREVIEW

Mouse

RIGHT: Tommy guns were all the rage in 1930s cartoons.

BELOW: *Mouse* is set in a crime-ridden city populated by rodents.





✎ In recent times, there has been an influx of adaptations (typically low budget) whenever a property loses its copyright restriction – just take the Winnie the Pooh horror film. *Steamboat Willie* was no different upon its public domain confirmation; several movie trailers, an AI model and its own horror game were unveiled starring the Walt Disney creation. According to Krzemień, *Mouse* will separate itself enough that the intellectual property's status was never a concern and "does not really have any impact on the project" whether the licence was renewed or not.

What about *Cuphead*, then? The run-and-gun 2D side-scrolling indie title from Studio MDHR was the first big breakout to use the rubber hose style of animation in videogames, going on to surpass 6 million sales in two years. Surely, there was some inspiration there?

"Though *Cuphead's* success was impressive, it didn't directly influence the artistic direction," says Michalak, again noting the animation style of the 1930s directly instead. "Our creative vision was also shaped by acclaimed titles such as *BioShock*, *BioShock 2*, *Doom*, and other 'boomer shooter' titles."

SATURDAY CARTOONS

BioShock meets *Doom* meets the art style of *Cuphead* is certainly an easy way to get people interested, even if that's not how the game is being presented by the studio. It's certainly what caught my eye – not to mention the arsenal of firearms at the player's disposal alongside the enormous possibilities that can be pulled from history. Everything from handguns and Tommy guns to shotguns are shown in shootouts. Then taking it one step further, the likes of finger guns, a grappling hook and the classic hand-to-hand scuffles give it the perfect look of a Saturday morning cartoon show gone wrong.

"We aim to celebrate the zany and exaggerated essence of classic cartoons, bringing to life a world teeming with whimsical weapons and comically over-the-top character animations," says *Mouse* game designer Jonatan Gozdek.

Taking the main combat aside, Gozdek adds that the finalised product will feature

more than just action. "Our goal is to craft an experience that captures the fun of boomer shooters while infusing the game with the narrative depth and exploratory wonder of *Metrodvania*, all set against the backdrop of a vibrant, animated world that embraces a good laugh," he says.

Some examples of this are ability-based exploration, different challenges as well as secrets that will pull back the curtain on the mysteries of the world and its inhabitants. A lot of work for a small team. That's why the Polish studio spends the same amount of time on research as it does animating all elements, relying on other boomer shooters as a reference and then converting it to the rubber hose style. While *Cuphead's* gameplay was hand-drawn on paper, inked and then inserted into the game before being coloured, *Mouse* will follow a different method.

Michał Rostek, who is acting as the game's art director, explains, "We animate in a hand-drawn style – and although we can't be 100 percent faithful to techniques from almost 100 years ago – we want our animated rodents to react as cartoonishly as possible to the mechanics we create."

CREATIVITY VS FEASIBILITY

With its ambitious aim for *Mouse* to be more "cartoonish" than any boomer shooter that has come before, it's easy to keep adding to the game. However, with a release date of 2025 still very much on the cards, the biggest challenge for the studio right now is creativity versus feasibility.

"There is always more that we would like to do. More tweaks, more polish," says lead producer Maciej Krzemień. "But sometimes less is more, or as we say, it is better to deliver five fully cooked features rather than ten raw ones."

"Ideas are cheap, but making them work – not so much. Every studio has to find a balance between fulfilling its ambitions and technical feasibility. And all of that has to be done within a set budget. The trick is to know when to say stop."

As a result of putting all of its efforts into *Mouse* and making sure it's a commercial success, Fumi Games' other project – an action shooter platformer called *Galaxi Taxi* – will take a step back for the time being.

"Everything we want to do in the future depends on the success of *Mouse*," Michalak says. "Personally, I think the most important thing is the project and the people involved, if we get those right then we'll see what happens next!"

Matt Poskitt

THE BIGGEST CHALLENGE FOR THE STUDIO IS CREATIVITY VERSUS FEASIBILITY

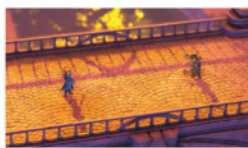


PREVIEW

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes



Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
23 April 2024

DEVELOPER
Rabbit & Bear Studios

PUBLISHER
505 Games

LINK
rabbitandbearstudios.com

EIYUDEN CHRONICLE: HUNDRED HEROES

Spiritual successor to Suikoden promises an grand adventure

There are several ways I could introduce *Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes*. I could tell you that it's a spiritual successor to the *Suikoden* series of JRPGs, which involve recruiting dozens of colourful adventurers to build the ultimate JRPG party. I could tell you that its developer funded the game's creation through the most successful videogame Kickstarter of 2020. I could tell you that it's been in development for four years. I could even tell you that it's finally coming out.

But I think the best way to introduce it is to say that, two hours into playing, I unlocked an ability that let my party punch a warthog into space.

As someone who is only passingly familiar with *Suikoden*, I was surprised by just how quickly *Eiyuden Chronicle* won me over. Its opening hours deliver a breezy, exciting adventure while sowing the seeds for grander, more dramatic events farther down the line. Its fundamentally traditional RPG mechanics, meanwhile, are refreshed and renewed by slick presentation and the presence of its affable characters. Also, it lets your new friends work together to sock enemies into the stratosphere, which is a good way to get me on board.

SETTING OFF

Eiyuden Chronicle started out as the passion project of *Suikoden*'s creator, Yoshitaka Murayama, a beloved and

influential figure in the JRPG scene who tragically passed away earlier this year. The project emerged from Murayama meeting up with friends he'd worked with at Konami for drinks, and reminiscing about his time designing the *Suikoden* games. "Murayama-san had been wanting to create an RPG that he had created back in his Konami days, and bringing this back with current technology," says game director Osamu Komuta. "The reason we started doing this project was to achieve what he wanted to achieve."

The game takes place in Allraan, a typical sword and sorcery world with rolling fields, walled cities and chocolate-box villages at its centre, and more extreme environments like deserts and mountains farther out toward the fringes. Like *Suikoden*, *Eiyuden Chronicle* distinguishes itself from JRPGs through its vast roster of characters, all of whom can be mixed and matched in your party for combat. Unlike *Suikoden*, which drew its characters from the classic Chinese novel *Water Margin*, *Eiyuden Chronicle* is based in an original world, with 100 new characters conceived for the game's story by Murayama. Tracking down all these characters is a key part of the game's appeal, and how they all interrelate is crucial to *Eiyuden Chronicle*'s storytelling and combat.

Regarding the former, *Eiyuden Chronicle*'s story initially revolves around a joint expedition between two neighbouring states, known as the League of Nations and the Galdean Empire. The expedition is tasked with tracking down a powerful magical artefact. At the centre of this expedition are Nowa, an eager yet inexperienced adventurer who joins the League on the day the expedition sets out, and Seign, a prickly, laconic Imperial officer who has the Empire's reputation resting on his young shoulders.

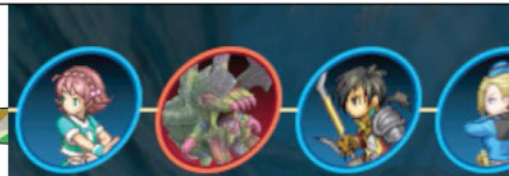
The two protagonists are joined on this expedition by a roster of familiar JRPG archetypes, including a grizzled mentor figure in the wolfman Garr, and Nowa's scatterbrained female companion Lian. Yet what could be unremarkable stock characters are made entertaining company by the game's sharp, lively writing, which deftly rides the line between taking its own world seriously, and having fun with its inherently sillier elements. The

PLAYED IT

ITS VAST ROSTER OF CHARACTERS CAN BE MIXED AND MATCHED FOR COMBAT

PREVIEW

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes



✦ knockabout tone is further elevated by the game's ebullient English voice acting, one of the many benefits reaped from the game's incredibly successful Kickstarter. Rabbit & Bear has undoubtedly invested the money wisely in this area, with an array of enthusiastic performances helping bring the characters to life.

CHARACTER SELECTION

In short, the prologue adventure succeeds in grabbing you by the arm and pulling you down *Eiyuden Chronicle's* road. The upbeat tone continues into the game's initial chapter, where you're able to wander the world more freely and recruit a few extra heroes. This includes the healer Francesca, who hides an explosive temper behind her demure exterior. My favourite character from the preview, however, is the highly strung 'desperado' Yusuke.

While this early portion of the game is generally lighthearted in tone, darker clouds lurk on the horizon. The game makes it pretty clear that the peace between the League and the Empire isn't likely to last, and that Nowa and Seign will find their newly established friendship stretched over two sides of a large-scale conflict. The story also has a third protagonist, Marisa, a druidic figure belonging to a forest-dwelling clan called the Guardians, whose allegiance the League and the Empire both seek.

As for how the remaining 97 heroes factor into the story, Komuta says that it varies. Each of the three protagonists, Nowa, Seign and Marisa has their own group of close friends and companions who are around from the outset of their respective adventures, amounting to "20 to 30 characters". The remaining 70 characters players will pick up along the way by "going through quests large and small, easy and hard".

LEND A HAND

Although their significance in the story may vary, all heroes can play a crucial role in combat. In its broad approach, *Eiyuden Chronicles'* combat is classic JRPG fare, mixing turn-based random encounters against assortments of basic enemies, with more bespoke boss fights and plot-critical battles. Every character has a

designated role in battle like melee fighter, spellcaster, or healer, and has access to a range of special abilities via magical artefacts called Rune Lenses that everyone conveniently carries.

Komuta says the basic framework of the combat doesn't get much more complicated than this, as Murayama wanted to create an experience where "everyone who touched the game can beat the story". This isn't to say that fights require zero strategy, however. During a given turn, rather than characters and enemies taking turns consecutively, you plan out your party's moves in advance, and then the entire turn resolves at once. This approach to turn resolution means you need to think ahead somewhat, planning your attacks to dispatch enemies before they can execute their own moves, and ensuring characters use defensive or healing abilities at the right time.

Yet even with this system, *Eiyuden Chronicle* is nothing like as brain-twisting as, say, *XCOM*. Instead, the combat's emphasis on flexibility and variety, with Komuta stating that "the freedom the user has will be expanding". As characters level up, they'll gain access to new, more powerful Rune Lenses. The bigger facilitator of this freedom, though, is *Eiyuden Chronicle's* Hero Combos. Here, two or more heroes can work together to perform an extra-powerful joint attack. This is where the warthog launching comes in, thanks to Nowa and Lian's 'Senior and Junior' combo. When this is activated, Nowa leaps forward and thrashes the enemy in question with his twin spears, while Lian winds up a devastating uppercut that propels her unfortunate target into the sky.

The preview build only showed a handful these Hero Combos, but with 100 available heroes, all of whom can combine their abilities in differently numbered groupings, the potential number of different combos is significant. Indeed, when I ask Rabbit & Bear how many different combos are available, the developers erupt in laughter, before simply answering "a lot".

STRETCHED GOALS

Like several other recent JRPG revivals, *Eiyuden Chronicle* adopts a hybrid 2D/3D art style. Environments are sculpted in reasonably detailed polygons, while key characters and friendly NPCs like animals are rendered in sprites. It may look quaint and picturesque, and it is in its quieter moments. But the art belies how flashy

PROGRESSION

You can choose to fight battles manually, or progress automatically using your prearranged battle plans.

◆ Select commands

◆ Fight
Auto
Flee

AS CHARACTERS LEVEL UP, THEY'LL GAIN ACCESS TO NEW, MORE POWERFUL RUNE LENSES



PREVIEW

Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes

RIGHT: Now those are some proper Shakespeare-level put downs. Clearly you do not piss off Francesca!

BELOW: This guy looks like he's going to need a Hero Combo kicking.



Eiyuden Chronicle: Hundred Heroes

and cinematic *Eiyuden Chronicle* can get, especially during combat. Seign, for example, has an ability called Sword Rain where he launches into the air and fires a barrage of ice-blue blades down at multiple opponents.

Komuta points out that originally, *Eiyuden Chronicle*'s presentation was supposed to be simpler than it is. But then the game's Kickstarter outdid its funding goal by over ninefold. "The thing that changed [most] from the original plan was the graphics," he says. "The visuals became much richer than what we originally planned because of this success." Much of this extra detailing has gone into the characters.

The other benefit of the Kickstarter, Komuta notes, is how it enabled the team to create the "huge volume of the game". Alongside funding everything in the basic plan, *Eiyuden Chronicle* also blasted through over 40 stretch goals. The features those goals promised include a Fortress Town mode that lets players build and expand their own base, minigames like fishing, cooking, and monster raising, a fully orchestral score, conversations, a farming system, a duelling system, various localisations, and much more.

Yet this long list of additional features is also the main reason why the game has taken two years longer to develop than originally planned. Komuta cites the example of the hot spring minigame, another stretch goal feature, where characters can bathe and relax in a traditional Japanese hot spring. For this, the game's art director, Junichi Murakami, opted to redraw all 100 characters without clothes so the minigame looked more authentic. This decision sparked protest from Komuta. "Hey, that's too much to do, making all these detailed creations," he recalls. Nonetheless, they went through with Murakami's plan, which gives a sense of how the studio has approached the design of those stretch goals.

CAMERA OBSCURA

With access to only the early part of the game, many of these additional features weren't available to test, so at present it's unclear what impact they will have on the core experience. Judging the overall scope

of the game from the chunk I played is also difficult, particularly how open-ended it will be. Structurally, it mixes large field areas that you explore from top-down, with more directed environments like forests, canyons, mines and so forth. There are certainly opportunities to explore at your own pace, choose which towns and areas you visit and run around freely within them. But it's hard to assess how open the game is at the larger scale, and the extent to which story progression will mediate your freedom.

There are also a few other issues worth raising. With its hybrid 2D and 3D visuals, Komuta cites the camera as being a particularly difficult development challenge. "It's not easy to give natural feeling to the camera movement in a game of this style," he says. While the camera was mostly unobtrusive across what I played, there were a few areas where it caused problems.

Elsewhere, although *Eiyuden Chronicle* is a pretty game, particularly in towns and in combat, some of the more linear dungeon areas can look a tad spartan. And while I found most of the available characters to be entertaining, some, like the pathologically kawaii magical girl Mellore, were more trying on my patience.

Finally, if you're not a fan of random encounters, *Eiyuden Chronicle* is unlikely to change your opinion on them. There's a respectable amount of enemy variety in the opening hours, but bumping into Rabbit Knights and other basic enemies did grow wearying after a while. Fortunately, the game features an elaborate Battle Plan system for automating encounters. This lets you set the party's broad approach to fighting and adjust tactics for individual characters, like which enemies they should target, and what attack types they should prioritise. I don't recommend using it for bigger fights, but it's fine for barrelling through low level random encounters.

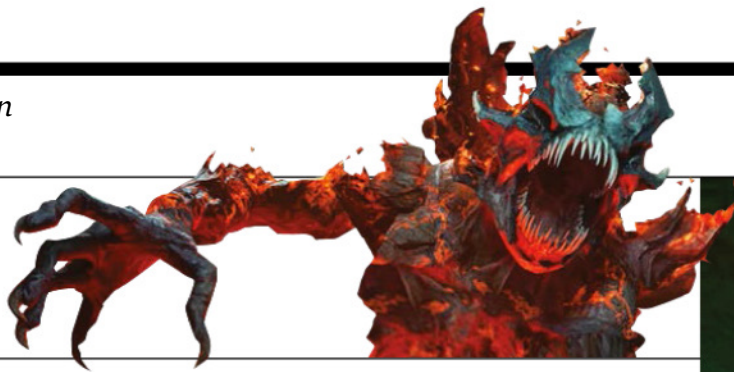
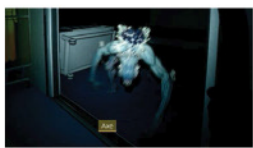
It's hard to judge the quality of an RPG on a few hours' play, but *Eiyuden Chronicle* makes a promising start. Its prologue adventure clearly demonstrates its *Suikoden* heritage. But it's also accessible to people less familiar with this strand of RPG. *Eiyuden Chronicle* may be Murayama's final game, but if the quality it shows in its early hours bear out in the long run, it could end up being not just a worthy successor to *Suikoden*, but an ideal entry point to discovering the departed designer's body of work.

Rick Lane

THERE'S A RESPECTABLE AMOUNT OF ENEMY VARIETY IN THE OPENING HOURS

PREVIEW

Level Zero: Extraction



NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
2024

DEVELOPER
DOGHOWL Games

PUBLISHER
tinyBuild

LINK
levelzerogame.com

LEVEL ZERO: EXTRACTION

Tarkov meets Alien in this terrifying extraction shooter

Level Zero: Extraction is a simple concept, it's what you would get if *Escape From Tarkov* took place in the *Alien* universe. This combines the gear fear of the former with the genuine terror of being stalked by an alien to create an incredibly tense experience.

It may not sound particularly unique, effectively taking the idea of one of the most popular games in the world and throwing it into a world that holds more than a few similarities to one of the most loved film universes ever created, but there is one key feature that makes *Level Zero: Extraction* a little more interesting than that – light.

When you spawn in as a human on the only map available in the closed beta, an abandoned research facility in the South Pole, you likely won't be able to see much with all the lights off and little to no natural light filtering in. You'll have to quickly flip on your flashlight, which has a very limited battery although does magically recharge while off, to create a thin and weak beam of light until you can stumble your way to a light switch and safety.

ALIEN MONSTERS

The alien monsters that will be stalking you as you wander around the research facility are damaged by light, and being caught in an illuminated room will see them burn up within seconds. Even your weak flashlight can help keep them at bay and more powerful torches unlocked as

you progress will be even more effective. But if they catch you in a dark room, which will happen thanks to lights turning off after a while or through a power overload that shuts down all lights in the facility, then you probably won't make it out alive.

This turns what may look like a standard extraction shooter into something much more intense because you can't just rely on your aim to make it out alive and the tight corridors of the facility mean you can't dodge fights without light to back you up. You'll have to plan your route, making sure not to go back on yourself to rooms where the power is depleted and have an escape plan in mind should the alien, which is controlled by other real players, find you. You can bring in, or find, some flares that will get you out of a sticky situation but unless you have a big bank balance you won't be able to rely on them for your entire run.

WATCH YOUR BACK

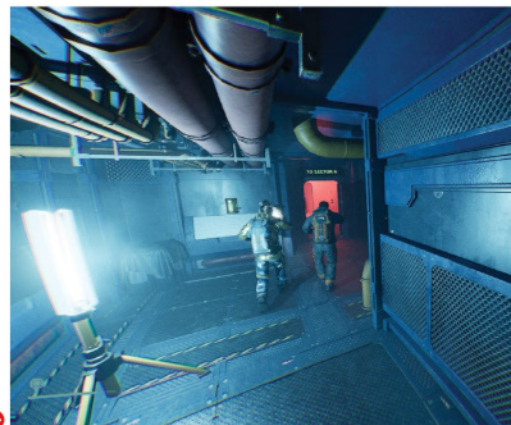
Your every move has to be planned around what light sources you have access to, and what you can use to fend off an alien should they get too close. But, as I discovered many times, just thinking about light leaves you very vulnerable to the other players on the map and running around with a big flare blasting light into every corner is going to give your position away a lot.

While the aliens are the scariest enemy you will run into, other human players are without a doubt the most lethal if they have any kind of real firepower. In most cases, one or two bullets, which are in short supply and cost quite a lot, will take you down, giving your killer access to all the loot you had on you. This makes actual gun fights reasonably rare, with most other human kills coming as a quick reaction when seeing movement or a more thought-out surprise attack if they haven't spotted you.

But with guns only being useful against humans and their rarity as loot you can find, it isn't uncommon to meet players who don't have a ranged weapon, instead coming in with a hatchet and a torch hoping to avoid humans at all cost. More than a few times, other humans let me be or signalled they meant no harm, and we just went our separate ways to continue



FIRST
LOOK



MONSTERS WILL BE STALKING YOU AS YOU WANDER AROUND THE RESEARCH FACILITY



ABOVE: There's never a bad time to loot, especially with double flares out.

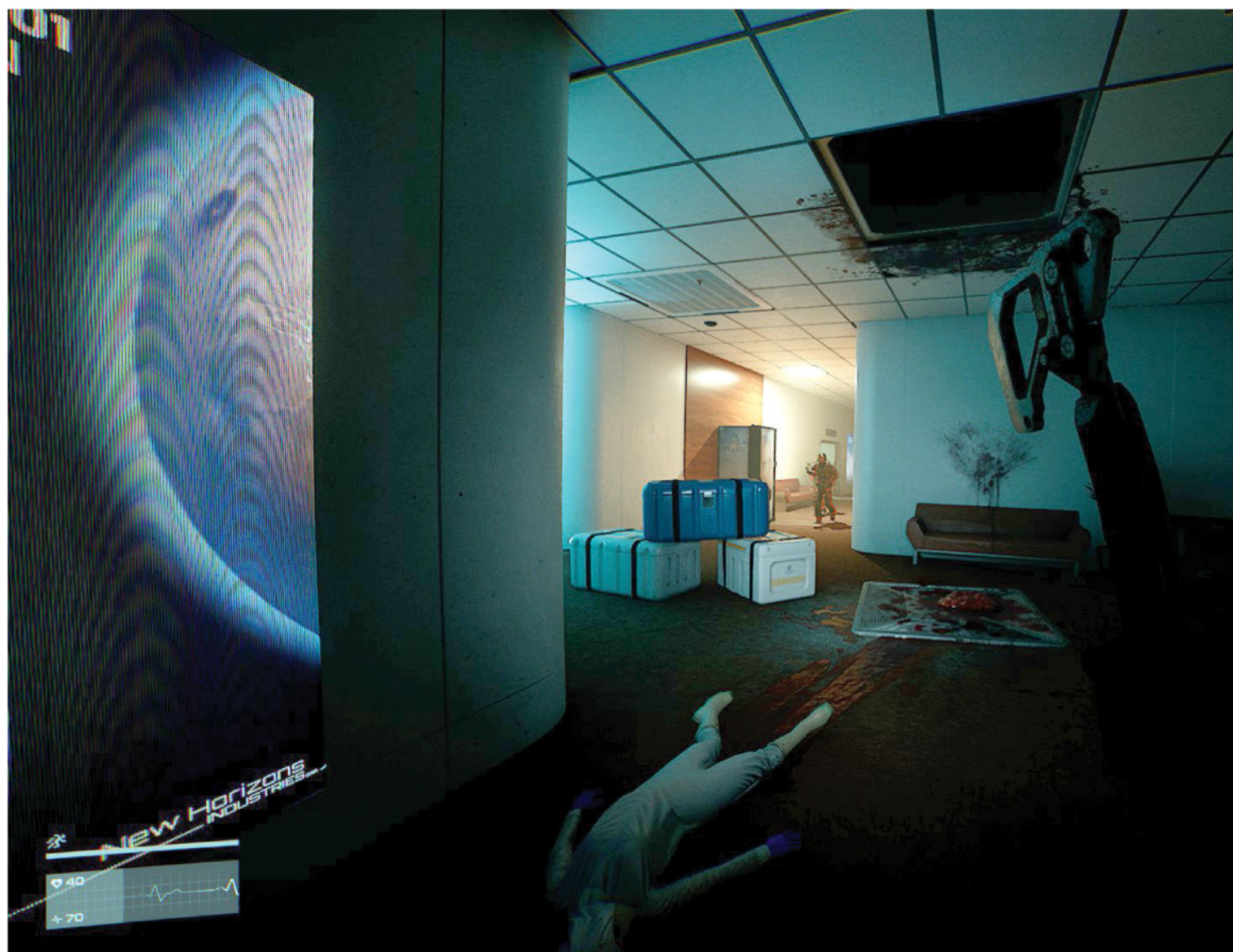
LEFT: You'll need to watch your back when looting in dark areas.

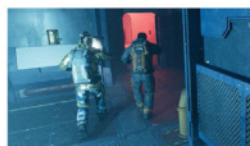
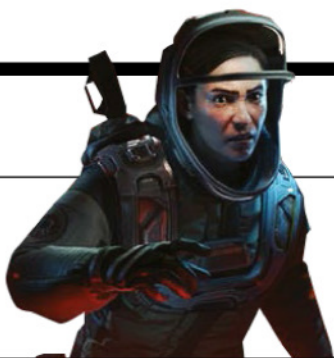
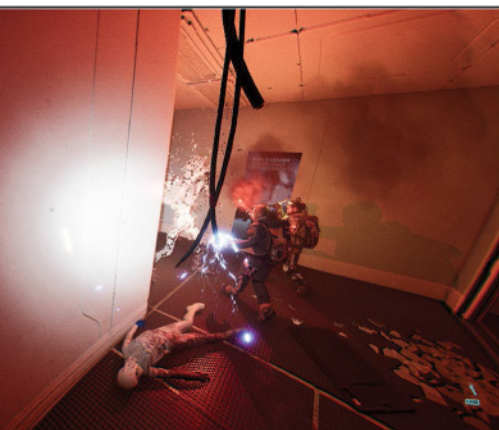
PREVIEW

Level Zero: Extraction

RIGHT: The lighting effects of flares make even basic environments look great.

BELOW: Other humans are scary, especially when you only have an axe to fight them.





☹️ looting, which is much more of a rarity in the likes of *Takrov*.

GOTTA GET LOOTIN'

Perhaps the most underwhelming part of *Level Zero: Extraction* so far is the loot, which does little to get you excited even when you find a rare item. Useful gear, like weapons and flares, seem to be on the rarer side while the other collectables currently have no use other than trading and selling, so you are never really looking for a specific item and can just take the most high-value ones you find. The value of every item you pick up can be seen on your inventory screen in the raid, so the thought process of what to keep and what to throw away is never more than a financial decision.

It also isn't helped by the fact that you have four secure spots that allow you to keep whatever items are placed in them even if you die. This means that should you find a particularly valuable item, such as the laptop that I found once during the beta that sold for 9,999 of whatever the in-game currency is, you can just stick it in one of these slots and never have to worry about losing it. The idea of safe spots isn't new, but there needs to be some kind of punishment tied to the loot for not making it out alive.

GENUINELY TERRIFYING

That being said, the gear fear is still very much a factor, especially if you take in some more expensive weapons which in the early stages are not easy to get a hold of. With the traders only offering more powerful equipment once they have been levelled up, losing a powerful weapon you found can consign you to running around with an axe for the next few raids, which mostly means praying you don't run into anyone and can keep the aliens at bay.

Add in the lack of light and impressive audio that constantly makes you think there is something around every corner and *Level Zero: Extraction* effectively becomes a horror game. I'm sure once you learn the maps fully and become rich enough to run around with massive torches all the time this will subside slightly, but those first few times in the

research facility got my heart rate up to concerning levels and even after a while an alien jumping out of the darkness will still give you a solid jump scare.

BE THE ALIEN

Another area that makes *Level Zero: Extraction* stand out is the fact that real players control the aliens who are trying to stop you from making it out alive. It's a take on the asynchronous multiplayer that games like *Evolve* tried and failed with, but this time it works because the human's goal is nothing to do with the aliens. It doesn't matter if you manage to kill them, as they will respawn in another part of the map after a while and will keep respawning until all the humans are dead or have extracted. In fact for a human, the ideal run is to never see the alien, just grab your loot and get out as fast as you can.

That means that all the aliens are trying to do is ruin the day of the human players, which combined with the knowledge that you can potentially make a real person shit their pants with some good play, makes it great fun to run around as an extraterrestrial.

After some early balance tweaks in the beta it never felt like the aliens were overpowered, but with some smart play and ability use you can take down even well-prepared humans quickly. You'll need to get up close to them to bash them round the head with your big claws, but with skills like an EMP to disable their electronics and a spitball to obscure their vision, that can be achieved easily. In fact, coming up against a single human rarely proved difficult if I waited for my opportunity to strike and didn't run out into a fully illuminated room.

There needs to be some kind of progression system added for the aliens, which is currently missing and somewhat lacking for humans as well, but this is one of the best asynchronous multiplayer experiences I've ever seen. As the alien, you feel like a menace out to ruin someone's day and scare the hell out of them, which while a little mean, is great fun. Then as a human, there's the addictive allure of finding great loot combined with the terrifying experience of walking around in the dark not knowing what is around the next corner. It's early days but I'm extremely excited to see more of *Level Zero: Extraction* and I think this could be the next great extraction shooter.

Mike Stubbs

AN ALIEN JUMPING OUT OF THE DARKNESS WILL STILL GIVE YOU A SOLID JUMP SCARE





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MELT



t 11 Bit studios' office in Warsaw, game director Kuba Stokalski is trying to show me *Frostpunk 2*. But the citizens

of New London, the game's virtual metropolis, have other priorities. Food and fuel are both running low, meaning large portions of the city are hungry and cold. Stokalski's recently built extraction district is finally producing coal, but he's placed it too close to several residential areas, causing a sharp uptick in squalor. Now, the city's representative Council is about to conduct its first vote – to decide whether to oust Stokalski as its newly appointed Steward. "I'm not doing so well, and they see it," Stokalski says, sounding flustered. "This isn't going to be an easy one."

Inside the Council's circular hall, Stokalski has a small group of loyalists – known as Stalwarts – on his side. The rest of the Council comprises technophilic New Londoners, and more humanist Frostlanders, neither of whom are happy with Stokalski's leadership. To get the votes he needs, Stokalski will have to grease some palms. He approaches the New Londoners with a deal, give him their approval, and I'll put more resources into city development. "Let's promise this and hopefully it will be enough," Stokalski says.

The New Londoners agree, and Stokalski scrapes through the vote. If he hadn't, the game would have been over – 15 minutes from when it started. "We could have failed this first vote. It is not scripted," he says, relieved. "We could have failed basically the third quest in the game." ➤

D O W N

Your biggest threat in **FROSTPUNK 2** isn't a storm of snow. It's the tide of humanity

By Rick Lane

Frostpunk 2

☞ If you wondered whether *Frostpunk 2* would be as unforgiving as its predecessor, know that the game's own director can't leave it to run for more than five minutes without flirting with disaster. Yet while life in New London is as harsh as ever, it's also radically different. The crater-city may have weathered the Great Storm of the first game, but now your citizens have survived the worst mother nature can throw at them, they've started to ask what lies beyond survival, what it means to live. It's a question that will cause you all kinds of problems as you attempt to build a thriving metropolis on the backbone of the apocalypse. It's also a question that *Frostpunk 2* has been redesigned from the ground up to explore.

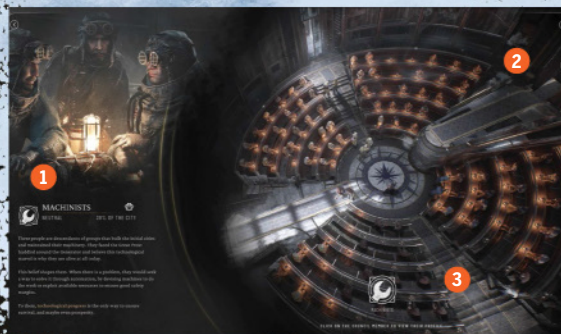
FLUID DYNAMICS

The extent of the changes over the first *Frostpunk* are evident from the moment I sit down with Stokalski. The crater New London sits inside, which seemed so vast in *Frostpunk*, looks here like a minor depression in a sweeping, ice-covered landscape. The towering chimney stack of the furnace that ensured humanity's survival, meanwhile, is a sooty speck in the centre of the screen.

There's more to this change than a simple increase in scale. But it's worth stating outright that *Frostpunk*

POLITICAL SURVIVAL 101

The dystopian joys of democracy



1 Clicking on a faction reveals its key ideology, how much of the city allies with them.

2 When you select a new law to vote on, the game will show you how likely it is to pass.

3 The Council chambers will show you the political strength of each faction at a glance.

2 will see you build a much bigger city over a longer timescale than the first game. "You no longer live in days," Stokalski says. "It's really weeks and months and even years. In a longer playthrough, this can take quite a bit of time. Also, the population is now in the thousands."

More importantly though, the change of perspective reflects the sequel's change of priorities. This emerged in typical *Frostpunk* style, with 11 Bit asking hard questions about the future of the series. The first of these questions, it surprised me to learn, was whether *Frostpunk* would get a sequel at all. "It was always the idea behind the *Frostpunk*

IP to have a world which we could set different games in," says Stokalski. "But it was not a given that we'd be making *Frostpunk 2*."

A sequel, 11 Bit decided, needed a reason to exist beyond simply cashing in on the first game's popularity. "The foundation of creation is that we have something to say, right?" adds Lukasz Juszczak, *Frostpunk 2*'s art director, and co-director of the game alongside Stokalski. "For a while we were thinking, 'Do we have something to say that would be meaningful?'" The debate went on for quite some time. In fact, it wasn't until late 2019, during a brainstorming session about how to expand upon *Frostpunk*'s



LEFT: While the city you'll build will be much larger, it'll maintain some of that radial look from the original.

THE SOCIETY
YOU INHERIT IS
VERY DIFFERENT
FROM THE ONE
THE CAPTAIN
RULED OVER

social simulation, that the idea for the sequel began to coalesce.

"We were talking about society as a liquid. Something that is moving around, something that can flow, can boil, can be flammable," Juszczuk says. This led the team to *Frostpunk 2*'s defining characteristic: where the first game was about tending a fire in the frost, ensuring New London neither froze to death, nor was consumed by the flame of discontent, the sequel would be about managing the fluid, changeable society that thawed into existence between the frost and the fire.

RUNNING MATES

This theme of liquid runs through every aspect of *Frostpunk 2*. But it flows from your central role in New London as the Steward. With 30 years having passed from the events of the first game, the Captain, the authoritarian leader who ensured humanity's survival by hook or by crook, is dead, and the Steward has been chosen to lead the city forward. As Steward, your

responsibilities are broadly similar to those of the Captain. You'll oversee construction in the city, select new technologies to research, despatch expeditions into the Frostland, and suggest new laws that affect how the city operates. You'll also need to ensure that your citizens' basic needs are tended to. Keep them warm, fed and, as best you can, keep them happy.

But the society you inherit is very different from the one the Captain ruled over. "In *Frostpunk*, as it was happening in the apocalypse, you had this convenient excuse for a very strong authoritarian government," Stokalski says. "After 30 years, this excuse is no longer there." Without the looming spectre of oblivion, your people are beginning to ask questions about what society should look like, and how it should operate. "Now they want a say in how the city is run," Stokalski adds.

Thus, New London's populace has organised into numerous factions, each with diverging ideas about how to move society forward. The

MAIN: The game takes place over a much longer timespan, weeks and months rather than days.

makeup of these factions differs based on what game mode you're playing, but in the story, two of the early factions you'll deal with are the New Londoners, who believe the city survived through embracing technology and so advocate for technological solutions, and the Frostlanders, who believe that human adaptiveness, not technology, ensured survival, and are more sceptical of solutions that rely on better tech.

As such, many concepts present in the original *Frostpunk* are now viewed through the lenses of these factions. For example, when pursuing technologies via the Research Institute you're "no longer coming up with ways to make a better hammer in the workshop," as Stokalski puts it. Instead, you'll be posed questions about how to improve society as a whole, and the factions will present different answers to those questions that you can choose from.

In the game, Stokalski arrives at a simple example, a question about how to produce more coal. To solve this problem, a technophile faction

ALL LAWS MUST BE PASSED BY A MAJORITY VOTE THAT TAKES PLACE IN THE COUNCIL HALL

like the New Londoners would advocate for building a grinding coal machine, which extracts more coal, but increases squalor level. The Frostlanders, meanwhile, advocate for more efficient coal usage, including collecting and burning coal dust. This dust can make people sick, but using it would avoid the need for building big, dirty machines.

There are two further points to emphasise here. First, these ideas do not exist in isolation, but rather as part of an 'idea tree' where embracing one suggestion can lead to further ideas that affect your society in other areas, such as economics, child welfare, policing, and so forth. "As these choices mount, this can shape your society and your strategy in the game can actually shift quite a lot," Stokalski says.

Second, choosing between different factions' ideas will affect your relationship with them, making them more or less inclined toward your leadership. These relationships then feed back into the game when you want to enact new laws.

MAIN: There are numerous factions in the game, each of which has its own ideas about how society should be run.

FAR RIGHT: The Great Storm may be over, but the cold can still cause problems.

SURFACE TENSION

Perhaps the biggest change in *Frostpunk 2* is that, unlike the first game, you can't just enact a new law and deal with the consequences later. All laws must be passed by a majority vote that takes place in the Council Hall, which represents the different factions. Because of this, you may find yourself in a situation where you want to pass a law but lack the support to do so.

In this instance, you can try to be bullish and demand the Council support you, but this may end up backfiring. Alternatively, you can negotiate with one or several other factions, promising to support one of their ideas provided they support yours. This could give you the votes you need to pass your own legislation. But you'll then be committed to following through on your promise, forcing you to either enact a law you might not believe in, or risk angering the relevant faction by reneging on your promise.

It's in this combination of factions, ideas and laws where the

fluidity of *Frostpunk 2*'s societal simulation emerges. You can approach these systems and the dilemmas they produce however you like, but your decisions will always have consequences. If you try to be idealist, and pass laws based on the ideas you think are best regardless of faction opinion, you could end up pleasing nobody in the Council, and end up lacking the support you need to maintain your position. On the other hand, if you commit purely the ideals of a specific faction, then the other factions may feel shut out and could radicalise, morphing into new factions with more extremist views. However you approach your stewardship, trust and tension play a crucial role, and letting trust fall too low or tension rise to high could lead to, as Stokalski puts it, a "destabilising situation".

Stokalski points out the Council was not designed as a "democracy simulator". Indeed, you can try to game the system to consolidate your own power, with a whole menu dedicated to more authoritarian

BIT PROGRESSION

Now survive this

THIS WAR OF MINE
2014

This harrowing simulation of civilians trying to survive in war established 11 Bit as a studio to be watched.

FROSTPUNK
2018

11 Bit's second game took the central themes of *This War of Mine* and applied them to an entire city, asking you to make hard decisions to protect humanity.

FROSTPUNK 2
2024

Frostpunk's sequel takes a further step back from simulating individuals, and instead has you building a social system from the ideals of factions.

FROSTPUNK 3
TBA

Who knows if 11 Bit will make a third *Frostpunk*, but if it does, presumably you'll have to manage the entire frozen Earth.

laws. "If you don't feel in authority enough, you might want to try to, let's say, tighten the screw a bit," he says. Rather, the Council is designed to showcase how a society seeks to define itself in the wake of an extreme event. "The people who lived through World War I, for instance, a lot of research that we did went into looking at how people's outlooks changed" he explains. "If we were to show the different aspects of the society, different ambitions taking [it] into

different directions, the way to show it best was in a system that made you as a player try to reconcile it."

CITY, SLICKER

The goal of these systems is to provide a more nuanced simulation of the idealism, pragmatism, extremism and ambition that feed into societal change, one where all these ideas flow in conversation with one another throughout the game. To put it mildly, it's an ambitious prospect, and combined with the

game's larger scale, means 11 Bit has had to rethink how the player builds the city itself, and their relationship with the individual citizens inside it.

To start with, players no longer place every building themselves. Instead, the sequel takes a more *Cities: Skylines* approach to urban development, with players placing down districts that have different functions (such as residential districts for houses, extraction districts for industry) which fill with buildings procedurally. These districts also form the backbone of your economy. "They either supply you a set of resources or demand a certain set of resources," Stokalski says. For example, an extraction district supplies coal to heat your city, but it also demands a certain number of your workforce to run.

The reasons behind this change are twofold. First, 11 Bit didn't want players to get lost micromanaging the city's infrastructure. "We wanted to simplify the cognitive space so you have more space in your head for the society, the large-scale choices," Stokalski points out. The other consideration is visual. The studio wanted New London to look good without players having to tweak every last building.



Frostpunk 2

➤ To do this, 11 Bit has come up with its own procedural tech, one that has that overarching theme of liquid poured into it. Your city streets glow like molten gold, while the game's much broader timescale means that everything moves faster; your citizens flowing along those streets like oil. Juszczak says these two substances, oil and gold, were key touchstones when developing *Frostpunk 2*'s visuals. "You can do great stuff, with oil, right? And also really ugly stuff," he says. "Gold is our energy basically consolidated [into] substance... after building the kind of creative background, it was easier for us to choose particular tools to represent stuff in the game."

On the subject of citizens, one of the biggest, and likely most contentious, changes to *Frostpunk 2* is that the sequel no longer simulates individual people. While you'll see people flitting about the streets, you won't be watching them drag sackfuls of coal through the snow after ordering them to do so. Stokalski explains that this is simply because the game is playing at a grander scale, and that a deep simulation of individual agents was never the point of *Frostpunk*. "Seeing people toiling in the snow

was part of it. But it was not the main point," he says.

NARRATIVE FLOW

Nonetheless, 11 Bit was concerned about losing sight of the humans at the centre of the game as it broadened the scope, so *Frostpunk 2* does have more personal moments. From time to time, story events will appear in the city, designed not just to add some human colour to the game, but also to bring about more specific social dilemmas. In one example, a child neglected by the city considers taking her anger out on other children. "The lack of regulation is causing tension to rise throughout the city," Stokalski says. "There is no common agreement on what the role of children in society should be. So naturally, what follows is trouble." In this instance, we could intervene by enacting legislation that regulates children's role in society, but this may require you to wrangle with the factions and the council.

It's also worth noting that *Frostpunk 2* has a considerably longer scenario than that seen in the first game. The story has multiple chapters, with new events cropping up as you send out scouting parties into the wider

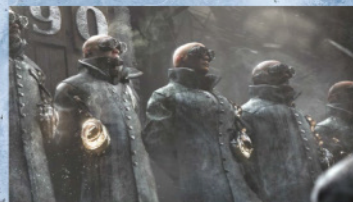
BELOW: The Frostlands hide discoveries that can dramatically affect the course of the game.



AT VARIOUS
POINTS IN ITS
PRODUCTION,
FROSTPUNK 2
HAS RUN ON THREE
DIFFERENT ENGINES

SPLINTER CELLS

Meet the radical factions you'll encounter in sandbox mode



TECHNOCRATS

- Formed from Engineers
- Utterly dependent on technology
- Complain about having to look after their own children



ICEBLOODS

- Formed from Foragers
- Advocate of social Darwinism
- Will leave people to die if they can't fend for themselves

Frostland, and your city expands beyond the central crater. "You can find very different things in and around the Frostlands," Stokalski says. "Some of the biggest surprises and twists and turns are going to come from what you can find here."

Stokalski naturally won't specify what those big twists are, but he does reveal they are mechanical as well as narrative. "I would even say that the bigger emphasis is on the gameplay side, even than the narrative," he says. "Because we are basically walking you through all of the different ways the game can be played."

Your experience with *Frostpunk 2* doesn't have to end with the story, either. Unlike the first game, *Frostpunk 2* will launch with a sandbox mode included out of the gate. Titled the Utopia Builder, this mode gives you free rein to play with the systems. Whereas in the story mode the factions you deal with are determined by the script (although you can side with them however you like), the Utopia Builder's factions are determined more organically. "The way you shape the zeitgeist of your city is going to define which factions form, and whether they are in opposition to you or in support of your actions," Stokalski says.

SPLASH BACK

Much like managing the factions of New London, bringing *Frostpunk 2*'s many systems and ideas together hasn't been easy. At various points in its production, *Frostpunk 2* has run on three different engines, eventually settling on Unreal. "There was an internal joke, that [game] industry, please don't release

another engine, because we'll switch to it," Juszczuk says. Moreover, the changes 11 Bit made to the game, from the act of citybuilding itself to how the society simulation works, also meant the team has spent considerable time figuring out how to present it all in a way that is recognisably *Frostpunk*. Juszczuk references the supply/demand system. "It's not groundbreaking," he says. "But on the *Frostpunk* ground, it was really challenging to explain that mechanic well."

Nonetheless, both Stokalski and Juszczuk are confident in the game they have produced, and hope players appreciate how it challenges what they refer to as the "power fantasy" inherent to the strategy genre. "In strategy games, whatever the player says goes right? I'm the boss," Stokalski says. "Here, they might say, 'No'. And this friction specifically comes from the fact that we are saying, 'If you're wanting to reconcile the different ambitions of your people, there's no easy way out of that.'"

With *Frostpunk 2*, 11 Bit is taking some big swings, and there is a chance its bold, challenging design might fall foul of its existing fanbase. But in the six years since *Frostpunk* released, the survivalist city-building genre has exploded, with countless games taking 11 Bit's ideas and exploring them in their own fashion. In such a climate, a safer sequel might have disappeared into the maelstrom. Yet however players ultimately respond to its ideas, there's no scenario in which *Frostpunk 2* fails to stand out. ■

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TWENTY YEARS AGO, ONE OF
THE GREATEST FPS FRANCHISES
ON PC PEAKED WITH **UNREAL**
TOURNAMENT 2004.

REMARKABLE IN ITS OWN RIGHT,
ITS STRIKING LEGACY EXTENDS
TO ITS ROLE AS A PLATFORM
FOR MODS THAT WOULD TURN
INTO ENDURING STANDALONE
FRANCHISES, AND ITS
INFLUENCE ON LATER GAMES,
ESPECIALLY ROCKET LEAGUE.

By Kyle Hoekstra



Sapphire [H]

Unreal Tournament 2004

(T)

he release of *Unreal Tournament 2004* represented a remarkable moment in PC gaming history. Not only was the game a joy to play, building on the multiplayer shooter mechanics that had originated in 1999's *Unreal Tournament*, but it was also able to be modded, and some of those mods would become standalone games themselves, launching the careers of their devs.

Released an astonishing 20 years ago, *Unreal Tournament 2004* was one of the outstanding first-person shooters of its time. This third iteration in the franchise brought a bounty of fantastical levels and deliriously lethal contraptions to the shooter scene, returning *Unreal Tournament* to the podium to rival interlopers such as *Halo*. It provided a counterpoint to a flood of military shooters while bringing the franchise "up to date" in the words of Epic Games' founder Tim Sweeney. Its fluidity of movement, good looks and bombastic gunplay cemented its status: IGN and Gamespot scored it

94, PC Zone 94%, and PC Gamer 92%. Edge called it a "triumph".

Two decades later, Epic's last game before partnering with Microsoft ahead of its unannounced second Xbox console is an artefact of unfashionable, but not obsolete, FPS gaming from the early 2000s. Its themes were scattershot and weird, yoking anthropomorphic reptiles with cosmic ancient Egyptians. Yet in surprising ways it shares DNA with the game that would supersede it at Epic Games: *Gears of War*.

It's remarkable for other reasons. *UT2004* became a cradle for community-created modifications. Thanks to Epic's initiatives to promote its tech, some mods became games in their own right. Arguably chief among the games to benefit from *UT2004*'s popularity is the extraordinarily successful *Rocket League*.

With the state of the *Unreal* franchise uncertain, turning an eye to the celebrated *UT2004* yields insights concerning not just the development and legacy of that game but of the numerous projects and studios linked to it, not least Epic Games themselves. So what is the story of *UT2004*? And what is its surprising legacy?

UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2

UT2004 might legitimately be better remembered as *Unreal Tournament 2*. The original *Unreal Tournament*, launched in 1999, had put Epic and collaborators Digital Extremes on the map. A multiplayer spin-off from the 1998's *Unreal*, it made a mark amid



BELOW: The burly Juggernaut race would be at home in *Gears of War*.

fierce competition, namely id's *Quake III Arena*. Its frenetic action unfolded as a futuristic spectator sport, and was buoyed by gratifying weapons whose alternate fire modes generated explosive, skill-based fun. A diabolical announcer boomed approval as 'frags' mounted, and its colourful visuals were informed by the pioneering technology undergirding it, Tim Sweeney's Unreal Engine.

The next *Unreal Tournament* would similarly double as a commercial for an upgraded Unreal Engine. An exclusive February 2002 cover story in PC Gamer US proclaimed *Unreal Tournament 2* as "the new face of futuristic combat". Reporting from Digital Extremes' office in Canada, its cover story described sports-like team management in the singleplayer, the new "balletic" dodges of its characters, and, most provocatively, its vehicles, including "a single-person speeder, a two-man skiff [...] and two others".

Cliff Bleszinski, Epic's former lead designer, writes in his 2022



UT2004 BECAME A CRADLE FOR COMMUNITY- CREATED MODIFICATIONS



LOADED

UT2004's iconic armaments



FLAK CANNON

The shotgun favourite fires chunks of shrapnel which ricochet off surfaces and make quite a dent at close range.



REDEEMER

The slow-moving, nuclear superweapon from the original game returns. Its secondary fire allowed the missile to be guided.



SHOCK RIFLE

Skillfully combining both firing modes, a languid energy ball and an energy beam, results in a huge, damaging blast.



BIO RIFLE

The globbiest of UT2004's weapons shoots glistening sludge, which otherwise puddles on the ground as a trap.

memoir Control Freak that, "As a sequel to a very successful game, the objective was simple: don't fuck it up". But there was a problem with *Unreal Tournament 2*. Digital Extremes was falling behind. It was already labouring on an Xbox version of the game called *Unreal Championship*, set to coincide with the autumn 2002 launch of Xbox Live. Epic filled the breach.

That summer, its name also changed to *Unreal Tournament 2003*. According to Bleszinski, Epic executives Mark Rein and Jay Wilbur wanted to annualise *UT* the way Electronic Arts had *Madden Football*. When it released in late 2002, it scored well, but approval was qualified. Gamespot criticised that "there's just not enough diversity, depth, or innovation in the gameplay". Crucially it didn't come with vehicles, certainly not the "land, air and team-based vehicles" announced for *Championship* at E3 2001. It would fall to another iteration to deliver on the promise of *Unreal Tournament 2*. *UT2004* was

announced at the following E3. It promised *Unreal* fans "an entirely new experience" featuring "devastating vehicular combat and wide scale warfare".

UNREAL WARFARE

While development of *Unreal Tournament 2003* had been assigned to Digital Extremes, an original project took shape at Epic. "I had notes for a large-scale, first-person multiplayer combat game," writes Bleszinski. He called it *Apex War*, which eventually became *Unreal Warfare*. "*Unreal* was known for its bright, gaudy lights, and I wanted to go somewhere [beyond]. It was the bleakness of war, I think." It gathered momentum at Epic, where it began to draw resources. Before a demo even existed, Bleszinski bragged that *Warfare* "featuring a ton of cool vehicles" was going to "out-Halo Halo" to Microsoft's Ken Lobb. "I wanted them to know *Unreal Warfare* would be even bigger."

In the early coverage of *Unreal Tournament 2*, PC Gamer was already



reporting how it would benefit from *Unreal Warfare*'s technology. In the same piece, Epic VP Mark Rein said *Unreal Warfare* was "probably about two years away". Hires that would become closely associated with Epic's future projects such as Chris Perna, Lee Perry and Jerry O'Flaherty, got stuck into the project. But when Digital Extremes fell behind schedule on *UT2003*, "We stopped working on [*Warfare*] to help Digital Extremes finish *UT2003*," Lee Perry told journalist Arthur Gies in 2018.

Instead of returning to *Unreal Warfare* after *UT2003*, the team was tasked with its follow-up. While Digital Extremes had worked on *Championship* and *UT2003*, Epic would do the heavy lifting on *UT2004*. *Warfare*, meanwhile, was delayed until it could be made with Unreal Engine 3. In the end, it wouldn't see the light as a finished game. The project from this time exists in tech demos: in a 2000 demo for an upgraded Unreal Engine, players fight over a large, *Battlefield*-like map with long-range weapons.

Characters with similar iconography appear in the engine's GDC 2002 demo, which demonstrates a war-ravaged industrial landscape and city streets, and extended scenes underground, a key focus of Bleszinski's for *Unreal Warfare* from the beginning. Another GDC demo revealed a flying vehicle.

"Basically everything that was good and interesting about *Unreal Warfare* turned into *Unreal Tournament 2004*," Perry told Gies. "We added vehicles to it, and conquest mode on these larger pieces of the terrain." *UT2004*'s critical success "kind of blew us away" said Perry. "So it wasn't necessarily thrown-away work. It got refocused." Yet *UT2004* wasn't alone in quarrying material from *Warfare*. Among those early glimpses is a repeated symbol which would become iconic: a gear.

THE WAR ROOM

"The rules of engagement have changed," stormed *UT2004*'s trailer. "Vehicular warfare. Aerial combat.

TEAM ROSTER

Eccentric characters of UT2004



CATHODE

A robot with incongruously rosy cheeks and some kind of cybernetic wings.



XAN

The tournament champion Xan Krieger returned to *UT2004* after missing out on *UT2003*.



MALCOLM

Supposedly the most famous of competitors, Malcolm is one of the tournament's potential finalists.



REMUS

Returning from *UT2003*, Remus (and brother Romulus) shored up the less wacky end of the roster.



KRAAGESH

One of the reptilian Skaarj aliens introduced in the original *Unreal*, Kraagesh competes for Iron Skull.



MR CROW

Another *UT2003* returner, Mr Crow of the 'Nightmare' race embodies the game's often bizarre tastes.

AMONG THOSE EARLY GLIMPSES IS A SYMBOL WHICH WOULD BECOME ICONIC: A GEAR



predecessors and brought it shoulder-to-shoulder with its rivals: the large-scale, objective-based game mode Onslaught and vehicles.

For Tim Sweeney, speaking in Epic's making-of film, it brought the game "up to date" as a "big, multiplayer, online war simulation game". Although in these respects *UT2004* benefited from ideas intended for *Unreal Warfare*, these features weren't implemented by Epic alone, but by community members whom Epic had brought into the fold.

CAR CRASH

"The real magic came from programmer Dave Hagewood," recalls Bleszinski in *Control Freak*. "I'd met Dave at GDC, where he was showing off a mod for *UT2003* that featured vehicles able to rocket up off the ground and zip through the air, something we weren't able to figure out on our own, and I knew we needed him for *UT2004*." A clue that Epic wanted vehicles was a test left inside *UT2003*, while Hagewood was also a *Halo* fan. His 'vehicle mod' replicated *Halo*'s vehicles and impressed Epic enough that he soon joined those toiling in the War Room. "It was an amazing time," Hagewood told Noclip's Danny O'Dwyer in 2016. "We were all just coming up with the coolest things we could and putting them into the game as fast as we could."

But the cool thing par excellence was Onslaught. Inspired by *Planetside*, Hagewood wanted to prevent the new, flying Raptor or

off-road HellBender from simply zipping from one base to another. He told *Beyond Unreal* in 2004 that he wanted "to create a limited number of battle fronts that would focus the fighting" but also mean "you aren't always fighting in the same area". A node system connecting points on the map fixed the problem elegantly. "That was the point in which people stopped saying, 'Wow, this game has a lot of potential to be fun,' and started saying, 'Wow, this game is really fun,'" he said.

The view over the map ONS-Torlan, where a tower surmounting a chasm separates Red base from Blue, remains *UT2004*'s most iconic vista. Players stream from bases aboard the Goliath tank or driving the fiendish Scorpion car, equipped with gruesome shearing blades that scissor out the sides. Fun among designers in the War Room proved indicative of *UT2004*'s success. Its demo was reportedly one of the top played online games in early 2004, and Onslaught on Torlan made up most of that. Reviews testified to the fact that *UT2004* set a high-water mark for the franchise. Eurogamer's review heralding "another multiplayer Epic" joined a chorus of acclaim, "Onslaught alone is worth the price of entry."

GOING SUPERSONIC

Onslaught proved the big break for Hagewood and his company Psyonix. Its work experimenting with *UT2004*'s physics-based vehicles eventually led it to publish a PlayStation 3 game featuring

[...] The tournament just went into overdrive." For such fighting talk, it's fitting that the room siloed off for its development at Epic's HQ in Cary, North Carolina, was branded the "Unreal Tournament 2004 War Room" by a huge banner on the wall. Here Epic marshalled its corps of developers, including recruits from the community, to complete *UT2004*. "Churchill had his underground war room, and we had ours," writes Bleszinski.

Excitement soon built around *UT2004*. A behind-the-scenes film shows designers testing gameplay at beige monitors. "Every day when we have our playtest," said Bleszinski, "those servers are packed with every employee from our company just jumping on and blowing each other all to hell and it's just great, great fun." Dozens of maps and reintroduced features which had been missing in action were added in. It might still have felt like an expansion pack without two key additions. These differentiated it from its

BELOW: Success in *UT2004* convinced Hagewood to build Psyonix as an independent studio.



FEATURE

Unreal Tournament 2004

acrobatic cars, in hindsight a precursor to its lucrative 2015 sequel, *Rocket League*.

Working alongside Hagewood was Ben Beckwith, whose modding of *UT2003* led Epic to recruit him onto *UT2004*. Post-release, they contributed to its *Editor's Choice Edition* and experimented with a vehicle stunt mutator on ONS-Tricky, a map resembling a monster truck arena. "[We] were really having a lot of fun taking one of the cars in the expansion pack and making it like, jump and spin in the air and do tricks and stuff like that," Hagewood told Gamasutra in 2015. They saw promise in the acrobatic vehicles. As they transitioned to an independent studio as Psyonix, it formed the basis for 2008's *Supersonic Acrobatic Rocket-Powered Battle-Cars*.

At this point another mod proved influential. Despite adding racing, obstacles and combat to the prototype, it only became genuinely fun when Ben's brother Adam proposed putting a ball in the arena. The Beckwith brothers were fans of *Deathball*, a *UT2004* mod which used movement physics to create skilful, team-based game featuring a ball. "Within a week, nobody was doing any work – they were just playing this game," said Hagewood.

Contract work for Epic made Psyonix experts on Unreal Engine 3, which it leveraged as a source of stability while it developed its concept. It resumed when *SARPBC* met limited sales. The name didn't help. "Even with low sales we didn't blame the game concept," Hagewood told MCV/DEVELOP in 2015. "We knew the problem was in our execution, our lack of polish, our marketing, and steep learning curve."

When *Rocket League* came out in 2015, pitched as "soccer, but with

OUTLANDISH CHARACTERS

The game's cast of cyborgs and space marines joined an eclectic group of interstellar warriors, joined by the game's fiction in a gladiatorial death sport.



DEADLY VEHICLES

New vehicles completely transformed the *Unreal Tournament* experience. The Raptor was the game's version of *Halo's* Banshee, a single-person and lightly armoured attack aircraft.

UNREAL TIMELINE

The Unreal franchise in order



UNREAL 1998

The first *Unreal* was co-developed by Epic MegaGames and Digital Extremes.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT 1999

The classic FPS was a multiplayer masterpiece. One of PC gaming's most iconic arena shooters.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2003

While exciting and good looking, it lacked the promised vehicles.



UNREAL CHAMPIONSHIP 2002

Epic's first console-only release was timed for the launch of Xbox Live.

Cathode [NIKE] (199)

ICONIC MAPS

ONS-Torlan was among dozens of maps to release with *UT2004*, which expanded with community-created maps and official releases.

Other memorable Onslaught maps included Red Planet, Crossfire and Island Hop.



UNREAL II: THE AWAKENING 2003

Unreal's sequel was developed by Legend Entertainment and didn't really feel like *Unreal*.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2004

Vehicles and scale rounded out this complete package of next-generation UT.



UNREAL CHAMPIONSHIP 2: THE LIANDRI CONFLICT 2005

Reportedly originating as *UT2005*, *UC2* arrived as a partly third-person shooter for Xbox.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT 3 2007

The last *Unreal Tournament* Epic released commercially was developed in the shadow of *Gears of War*.



UNREAL TOURNAMENT 2014

Launched alongside Unreal Engine 4 as a crowdsourced project, but has long since been abandoned.

IN THE TWO DECADES SINCE UT2004 LAUNCHED, EPIC GAMES GOT MASSIVE

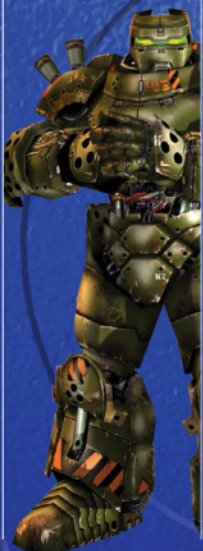


rocket-powered cars”, it surpassed expectations. By August it had been downloaded over 5 million times. By 2018, 40 million people had played it. It was vindication for an idea that had been germinating for a decade, whose cars could claim descent from *UT2004*’s diabolical Scorpion. “I still have this giant banner that we put up on the wall that says *UT2004* War Room,” Hagedwood told Noclip’s O’Dwyer in 2016.

TOTAL CONVERSION

Other modders’ contributions to *UT2004* proved transformative. Like its predecessors, *UT2004* was bundled with the same powerful tools used to create it, resulting in a spate of player-made content. In addition to extra vehicles from Psyonix, the *Editor’s Choice Edition* included 11 community-created mods. Many were candidates in the \$1,000,000 Make Something Unreal Contest. Organised by Epic, it was “designed to take people with talent and mod-making and help them become professional game

ABOVE: Unreal Engine 2 boasted higher polygon environments and increased texture detail.



developers”, according to Mark Rein. Ultimately, a substantial portion of the prize was actually a licence to publish with the Unreal Engine.

Nonetheless, Tripwire Interactive co-founder Alan Wilson credited the grand prize win for WWII conversion mod *Red Orchestra* as the reason his studio exists. “It gave us exposure, publicity, feedback, experience and an engine licence we couldn’t have afforded on our own at

that time,” Wilson told PC Gamer in 2017. First they turned the *UT2004* mod *Red Orchestra* into a standalone franchise, then did the same with cooperative survival mod *Killing Floor*. Among the wave of successful independent projects to mature from *UT2004*’s toolkit was the top-down, squad-based shooter *Alien Swarm*, later released by Valve as a Source-based game. Another was *Air Buccaneers*, a sort of steampunk *Sea*

DESPATCHES FROM THE FRONT

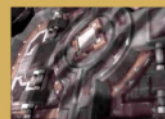
Traces of Unreal Warfare lurk in Unreal Engine tech demos



THE HOLLOW
Sending a squad into a subterranean world of baddies was a concern for *Unreal Warfare* long before *Gears of War*.



EXECUTIONER
The Unreal Engine’s 2002 demo at GDC depicted a gruesome arm-rip execution move that would end up in *Gears of War 3*.



LOCUST
The symbols for *Gears*’ Locust and Cog factions loomed in the background of the *Unreal Warfare* project.



SCALE
After *Unreal Tournament*, Epic began experimenting with large-scale battlefields as in this 2000 demo.



of *Thieves*, which was remade in Unity for release in 2012.

THE GEARS CONNECTION

After wrapping up *Unreal Tournament*'s second act with *UT2004*, it's hard to believe that Epic's next game was a co-op, third-person action-horror shooter for the Xbox 360. "I knew in my bones I wanted to make something new and different," Bleszinski wrote. *Gears of War* was that, unquestionably. It depicted a war between order and chaos, and a disgraced band of soldiers in its midst. Instead of dancing around enemies in neon arenas, players interacted with desolate environments by diving into cover like their lives depended on it.

When Microsoft announced its multi-game partnership with Epic in autumn 2003, it was founded on the credibility of the *Unreal* franchise. As it had with *Halo* on the original Xbox, Microsoft sought an exclusive to draw players to its next console. Targeting *Halo*'s audience was

essential, since *Halo 3* would only arrive in 2007. "Out-*Halo*-ing" *Halo* was, after all, exactly what Epic had in mind for *Unreal Warfare*. However as the game took shape, it dropped the *Unreal* link altogether.

Yet for *Gears*' departure from *Unreal*, it retained shared DNA with *UT2004*. There is, of course, the appetite for gibbing and guns with killer alternate-fire modes, but more specifically there are the fragments of *Unreal Warfare*. Having shifted to Unreal Engine 3, elements of *Warfare* not incorporated into *UT2004* were used to demo the new tech. "We took the content that we developed with that demo and we just built on it, and eventually that became *Gears of War*," artist Chris Perna told Arthur Gies for the book *Gears of War Retrospective*. That those early tech demos are full of iconography of *Gears*' Cog and Locust factions is evidence of that relationship. One even follows a proto-Delta Squad infiltrating a cavern occupied by a ghostly-skinned enemy.

TRULY EPIC

In the two decades since *UT2004* launched, Epic Games got massive. Epic had fewer than 60 staff in 2004. After a trilogy of *Gears* games, the launch of *Fortnite* and the Epic Games Store, successive iterations of the Unreal Engine, and various acquisitions, Epic has some 4,000 employees. Epic acquired its former *UT2004* partners Psyonix in 2019, along with *Rocket League*, for an undisclosed sum – though

enough for Hagewood to get "hooked on the superyacht lifestyle" and profiled in *Forbes*.

Epic might have merged with Digital Extremes, too, with founder James Schmalz displacing Cliff Bleszinski as lead designer, if not for complications of immigration and taxation. Shipping *UT2004* thus signalled their last collaboration. DE's onward trajectory thereafter matched surprisingly closely with Psyonix's, subsisting on contracts until achieving lasting success with 2013's *Warframe*. Bleszinski left Epic in 2012. His next game *Lawbreakers* landed well among critics in 2017, including PC Gamer's Evan Lahti who called it a "high-speed, high-skill FPS grown in the soil of *Unreal Tournament*", but never attracted enough players to stay afloat.

Although the death sport aesthetic is in vogue in 2024, with *The Finals*, an FPS taking place within a game show from former *Battlefield* devs, among the most recent, the future of the *Unreal* franchise is ambiguous. That in 2022 Epic delisted *Unreal Tournament* games from digital stores and terminated official multiplayer support, and has put two modern revivals on ice, isn't a source of optimism. It's a shame, when *UT2004* possesses such particularly refined movement, enduring clarity of visuals and a flak cannon with an addictive kick. We might cautiously hope that what looks like indifference instead signals protectiveness, and thus abiding interest, in *Unreal Tournament*. ■

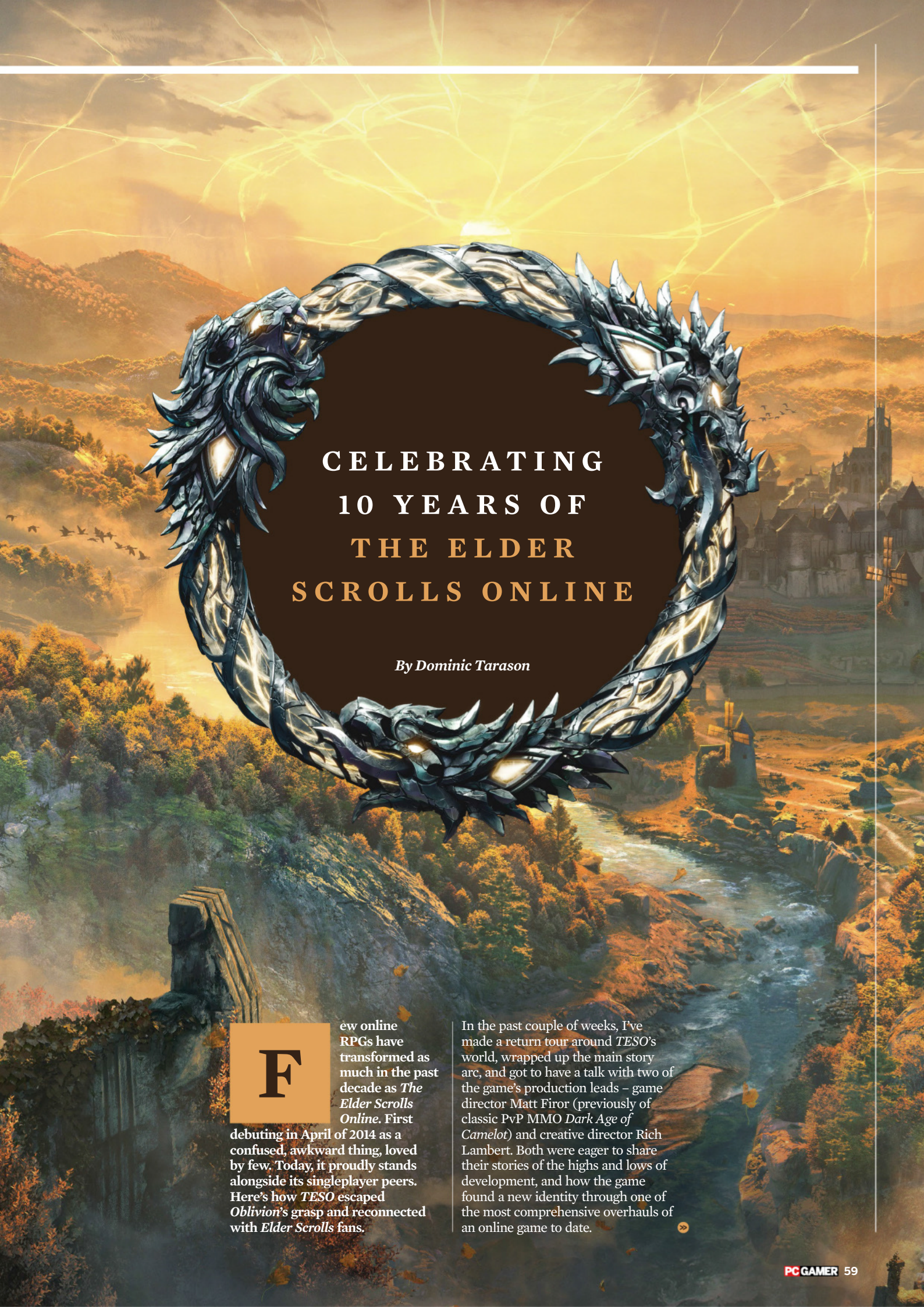
BELOW: Character designs were often... inspired.



FEATURE

The Elder Scrolls Online





CELEBRATING 10 YEARS OF THE ELDER SCROLLS ONLINE

By Dominic Tarason

Few online RPGs have transformed as much in the past decade as *The Elder Scrolls Online*. First debuting in April of 2014 as a confused, awkward thing, loved by few. Today, it proudly stands alongside its singleplayer peers. Here's how *TESO* escaped *Oblivion's* grasp and reconnected with *Elder Scrolls* fans.

In the past couple of weeks, I've made a return tour around *TESO's* world, wrapped up the main story arc, and got to have a talk with two of the game's production leads – game director Matt Firor (previously of classic PvP MMO *Dark Age of Camelot*) and creative director Rich Lambert. Both were eager to share their stories of the highs and lows of development, and how the game found a new identity through one of the most comprehensive overhauls of an online game to date.

The Elder Scrolls Online

TESO's story begins 17 years ago, an eternity by videogame standards. *Oblivion* was only 18 months old, and *Fallout 3* was an up-and-coming hit. "Our North Star at the time was *Oblivion*," reminisces Firor. "The very first version of ESO we worked on – for the first two or three years – was very much a mid-2000s MMO with *Oblivion*'s IP. And then *Skyrim* launched, and everything changed."

This prompted a fundamental redesign of the game, including massive systems and visual overhauls, according to Matt. "*Skyrim* was like a social phenomenon, and we knew that our original concept just wouldn't fly in a post-*Skyrim* world. We were the next *Elder Scrolls* game to launch, so we had to make the game more *Skyrim*-like and we only had like a year and a half to do it."

Among the features that had to be rushed into place were a first-person mode, *Skyrim*-ish combat (free of the tab-targeting of older online games), and fully voiced dialogue for all the game's NPCs in multiple languages, a directive that was hard to break to their localisation producer, according to Lambert. It was a valiant effort, but Firor sums up the release version's primary issue, "It wasn't *Elder Scrolls* enough."

Probably the least *Elder Scrolls* thing about the game was that it had traditional level-based progression. You chased sources of XP and levelled and gradually unlocked more areas. Players would be fighting over objectives required for progression, as everyone was stuck on the same track. It had some of that *Elder Scrolls* aesthetic, but it felt like an early 2000s MMO in bad *Skyrim* cosplay. Players were getting bored and turning to other online games. The next two and a half years of the game's development were then dedicated to completing TESO's transformation into a 'true' *Elder Scrolls* game.

ALL FOR ONE

One of the first big signs of TESO's course-correction came on March 17, 2015. The game previously ran on a traditional retail-and-subscription business model, which was becoming increasingly unpopular at the time. Now you could play the game whenever so long as you'd just bought a copy, with the subscription now offering a variety of perks, including a separate (bottomless) inventory for crafting gubbins, and access to the many minor bits of DLC as they were released.

The big change – the *One Tamriel* update – launched in October of 2016, and was the turning point for the game. It did the seemingly unthinkable and patched out level-based progression. Mostly. You still gained skill points from experience and unlocked new features at specific break-points, but the world was no longer a level-segregated space, and quests had most of their requirements stripped.

On paper it sounds like a relatively minor thing, but in practice it completely changed the structure of the game, establishing a solid foundation that has brought in new players for years, and given the studio even more freedom to experiment in how it expands the game through major releases (like the recent *Necrom* expansion, and the soon-to-launch *Gold Road*), and through regular, smaller DLC.

DON'T CALL IT AN MMO

When I asked what sets TESO apart from other MMOs, the first thing both Firor and Lambert brought up is that they don't refer to TESO as an MMO, internally or otherwise. "That's freighted with a bunch of game systems that TESO doesn't have." Instead, they prefer to call it a sandbox virtual world, as opposed to traditional 'on rails' RPG design. It's a point that's hard to argue, as ever since the *One Tamriel*



THE PREMIUM SCROLLS

The *Morrowind* chapter is included too



SUMMERSET

Get embroiled in high-elf politics, but you're probably here to join the time-bending Psijic order.



ELSWEYR

Discover just how weird the khajiit really are, in their many feline forms. Also butt heads with a stream of dragons.



GREYMOOR

Visit *Skyrim* in the off-season, while the dragons are in *Elsweyr*. The weather seems to be turning people into zombies.



BLACKWOOD

A swampy region featuring portals to the Atoll of Immolation. Also the debut of Companions.



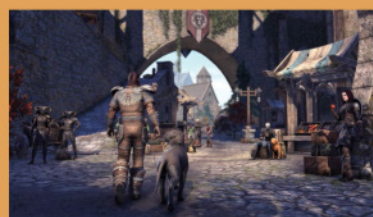
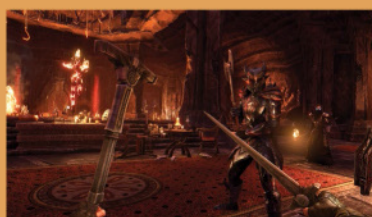
HIGH ISLE

Knightly drama abounds in this scenic Breton getaway, with only occasional volcanic activity.



NECROM

Set off on a fresh adventure after signing a employment contract with the Daedric demigod.





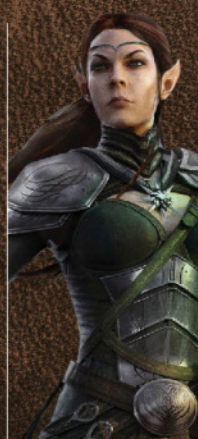
EVEN
'ENDGAME'
CONTENT IS
AVAILABLE FROM
EARLY ON

overhaul, the game has been very content to let each player blaze their own trail.

While obviously not the same kind of anarchic moddable sandbox as *Skyrim* or *Oblivion*, this still feels like an authentic *Elder Scrolls* game. Character creation comes with a variety of starting locations and quest threads, and you're free to tackle stories as you see fit, unconcerned about level. You can be a buff warrior and still become a top ranking member of the Mages' Guild, while moonlighting as a master thief and assassin for the Dark Brotherhood.

Amusingly, the only two things you can't be at the same time (without exploits) are a vampire and werewolf, making for one of the game's toughest choices.

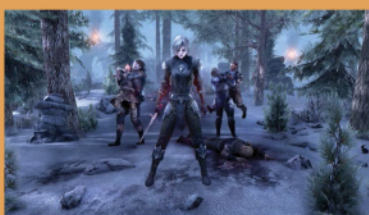
Similarly, Firor also highlighted that *TESO* never refers to its expansions as such, as that's a bit of a loaded term, too. Unlike its peers, each new Chapter is intended to be a mostly self-contained experience that you can play in any order, or even start a completely new character in, further adding to that classic *Elder Scrolls* 'You see it? You can go there' feeling. While there are some



ongoing story arcs, almost everything is designed to be accessible to players of almost all levels. Even 'endgame' content is available from early on, with some higher-difficulty variants unlocking over time, but for the most part, *TESO* is a casual experience.

ADVENTURE ON DEMAND

"You don't have to grind through the nine years of content we've built," says Lambert, explaining just why the game is structured the way it is – more open and freeform than any other contemporary online world, MMO or otherwise. "The questing



LEFT: There's something oddly calming about exploring dungeons.

RIGHT: Hermaeus Mora, Prince of knowledge, oversized monocles and contract small-print.



TESO IS A WORLD THAT WANTS TO BE EXPLORED

and delves – the storytelling – are set up to be easier. But then you’ve got co-op dungeons, open-world group events, world bosses. Every zone is a pancake-stack of difficulty,” Firor expounds.

It doesn’t sound too much different from other online RPGs, but having dabbled in most of them at some point or other, *TESO* does stand out as being especially accessible. You’re free to pick what storylines to follow, and won’t be especially challenged while you’re finding your bearings. Combat is simplistic, roughly mirroring *Skyrim* with a few

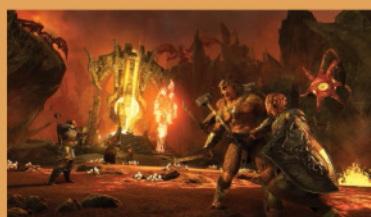
additional hotkeyed attacks, and death is easily avoided during regular questing, even more easily if you pick up one of the chatty Companions, NPC party members introduced in *Blackwood*, the fifth Chapter.

Not to say that the game doesn’t eventually push back, but the difficulty is mostly relegated to event bosses, public (or four-player matchmade) dungeons, or 12-player ‘trials’, which are *TESO*’s take on raids, albeit designed for relatively casual play until you hit level 50 and unlock their punishing Veteran difficulty modes. Dungeons also

have optional hard variants, serving up short, sharp bursts of opt-in difficulty in an otherwise very easy game. *TESO* is a world that wants to be explored, and it won’t hurt you unless you ask nicely.

THE NEWER SCROLLS

Being such an open game, I asked Firor and Lambert where they thought a completely new player – fresh to MMOs or even the *Elder Scrolls* series as a whole – should start. Both (unsurprisingly) recommend newcomers stick with the original story arc, seeing you



LEFT: When all you’ve got is a hammer, everyone looks like a nail.

RIGHT: Roaming bosses mean you might get in a fight you can’t solo.





facing down the invading Daedric prince Molag Bal, while gently introducing the game's world, setting and mechanics. For experienced *Elder Scrolls* fans or returning players, they recommend *Orsinium*, an earlier DLC pack set in frozen orcish territory, as it's a strong example of how the studio has grown and learnt design lessons over the years.

"We are definitely smarter now than we were back then," Lambert remarks as he talks about *Orsinium*. "We found out we can actually make denser cities with a lot of verticality that we didn't know we could do back in the old days," adds Firor, their pride in the expansion clear. Clearly eager to talk about it, Lambert gushes, "*Orsinium* is one of my favourite stories. It's got some of my favourite content, like the Maelstrom Arena, which I love as a solo-type player."

Lambert's personal favourite slice of the game, narrative-wise, is surprisingly one of the minor DLC packs. "If you're an *Elder Scrolls* fan and you've played ESO for a while, my favourite storyline is Murkmire, a smaller DLC that we did back in 2017. It starts out very Indiana Jones, but ends up cosmically affecting the entire space-time continuum of Tamriel. Plus it's an Argonian zone, so it's kinda weird anyway."

BLANK CHEQUE

Over an hour of chatting with them, both men revealed themselves to be huge old-school *Elder Scrolls* fans, right back to the DOS originals, and they've had a great time writing fresh lore and stories in the setting. While there's some agreement on specific bits of lore that they can't expand on (including some mysteries that must never be revealed, like what exactly happened to the mechanist Dwemer), they're basically being handed a blank cheque to write whatever *Elder Scrolls* stories they please, even

bending the lore a bit to allow things like dragons to crop up in the *Elsweyr* Chapter, when they were (previously) canonically inactive.

GOLD ROAD

TESO's next year is going to be one of its most interesting. Deep lore scholars will probably find plenty to get their teeth into with the upcoming *Gold Road* Chapter, delving into high-elf territory, a part of the setting that has seldom been directly in the spotlight. Firor and Lambert also promised an absurd 15 months of anniversary celebration events, running all the way through this next major DLC release and the next, hinting that we might be in for a particularly long story arc here, running until next summer.

With player counts holding strong across PC and consoles and no end of new Chapters and DLCs in sight, it seems likely that *The Elder Scrolls Online* will still be around and kicking in another five or even ten years, proudly standing alongside other enduring legacy MMOs (yeah, I said it) like *Guild Wars 2*. When asked where they saw the game going over the next few years, Firor painted a picture of a game in a strong place, but ready to adapt if needs be.

"We're starting our second decade. We're super successful. We've made something that has been an important part of many people's lives. But if you look back at the 17 years since the studio was founded, we've never been shy about making changes. We've got a good thing going, and we're doing new Chapters every year, but if we ever see the need to change things and mix it up, maybe experiment with the new content model, we will."

Considering that the game has now generated two billion dollars for Zenimax, it would be madness for Bethesda to slaughter this golden goose, even if it started out as an ugly duckling. ■

LEVELLING UP

A breakdown of your average adventuring session

15%
Warp into a new zone and stumble around looking for quest-givers.

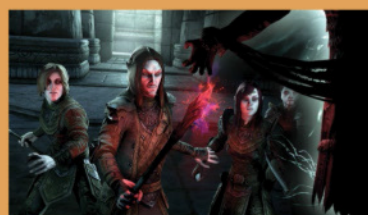
12%
Agonise over end-of-quest moral decisions. No takebacks!



16%
Get turbo-murdered when you aggro a roaming world boss.

21%
Become hideously sidetracked redecorating your player housing.

36%
Dungeon delving, day-saving and general heroic quest-doing.



REVIEW

HOW WE REVIEW

We review each game on its own merits, and try to match it to a reviewer who's a passionate expert in the field. The main aim of reviews is to help you make buying decisions. To this end, we're selective about what we review, and try to focus on the notable, interesting, exciting or surprising.

DOWNLOADABLE CONTENT

DLC might be new missions for a game, or it might be a single new item. If we think you want to know about it, we'll review it.

EARLY ACCESS

Any released alpha, beta, or otherwise unfinished game that you can currently pay for. For these games, we won't assign a score, but we will tell you whether they're worth your time.

THEY'RE BACK

Whenever there's a bargain or re-release of a significant game, our expert will revisit it and tell you whether it holds up today. With jokes.

OUR SCORING SYSTEM EXPLAINED

00%-09% Broken or offensively bad; absolutely no value.

Example *Leisure Suit Larry: Magna Cum Laude*

10%-19% We might be able to find one nice thing to say about it, but still not worth anyone's time or money.

Example *Gettysburg: Armored Warfare*

20%-29% Completely falls short of its goals. Very few redeeming qualities.

Examples *Family Guy: Back to the Multiverse*

30%-39% An entirely clumsy or derivative effort. There's little reason to play this game over a similar, better one.

Examples *Trials of the Blood Dragon*

40%-49% Flawed and disappointing.

Examples *Aliens: Colonial Marines*

50%-59% Mediocre. Other games probably do it better, or its unique qualities aren't executed well.

Examples *Primordia, Homefront: The Revolution*

60%-69% There's something to like here, but it can only be recommended with major caveats.

Examples *No Man's Sky, Ghost Recon: Wildlands*

70%-79% A good game that's worth playing. We like it.

Examples *Prey, NieR: Automata*

80%-89% A great game with exceptional moments or features, and touches of brilliance. We love it.

Examples *Overwatch, Night in the Woods*

90%-94% A compelling recommendation for most PC gamers. Important to PC gaming, and likely ahead of its time.

Examples *Bayonetta, Dishonored 2*

95%-96% Far and away one of the best games we've ever played. We recommend it to the entire world.

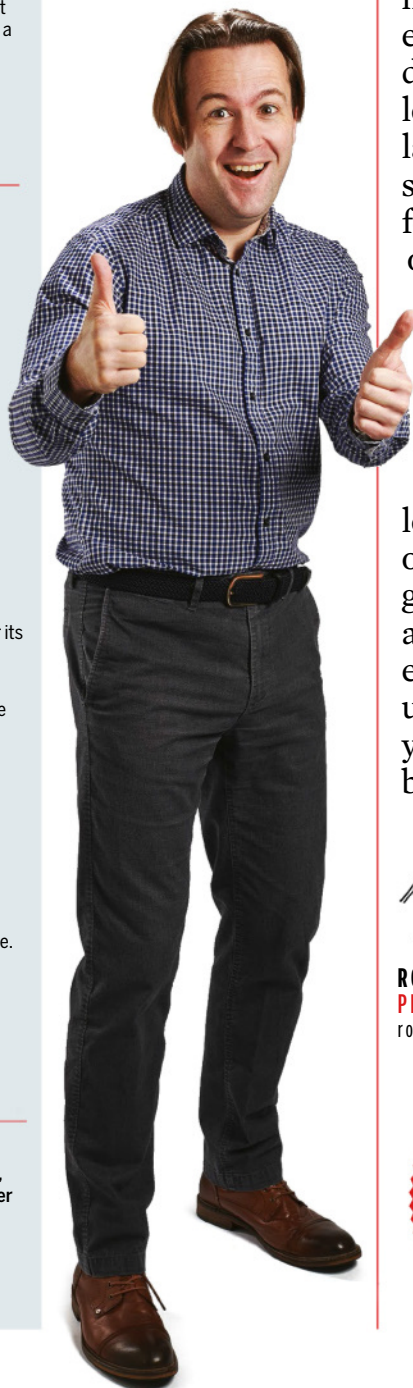
Examples *Half-Life 2, Kerbal Space Program*

97%-100% Advances the human species. Boosts the immune systems of nearby children and small animals.



The Editor's Choice award is granted in addition to the score, at the discretion of the PC Gamer staff. It represents exceptional quality or innovation.

Find out more
www.bit.ly/pcgreviews



Future past

The original *Outcast*, released in 1999, was groundbreaking. I can remember to this day how mindblowing its expansive voxel engine was on release, how jaw-dropping its now iconic portals looked, and how I bought the game largely based on the beauty of its shimmering pools of water alone. It felt like a game from the future, and one that transported PC gamers to a new world of PC gaming, one where cinematic storytelling and audio-visual wizardry ruled.

Fast-forward to today in 2024 and *Outcast – A New Beginning*, while looking like a future version of the original *Outcast*, is very much a game from the past. It's not bad by any means, but its slick looks and emotive audio sit over a largely unadventurous open world design you've experienced many times before. The jetpack is ace, though.

R. Jones

ROBERT JONES
PRINT EDITOR
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**LET US KNOW
 WHAT YOU THINK**
 Email us via letters@pcgamer.com with your reactions, or simply tweet us your thoughts @PCGamer



Contents

- 66** Dragon's Dogma 2
- 72** Star Wars: Dark Forces Remaster
- 74** Outcast – A New Beginning
- 78** Classified France '44
- 82** Horizon Forbidden West

FREE GAMES

- 86** Lee Carvalho's Putting Challenge 2
- 87** 20 Small Mazes
- 87** Psychopomp

THEY'RE BACK

- 88** FEAR
- 89** Phasmophobia
- 89** Pac-Man Championship Edition DX

This month's dogmatic reviewers...



FRASER BROWN
Specialist in
Curing Dragonsplague
Currently playing
Dragon's Dogma 2
This month
Threw many, many companions off bridges. Oh, and in *Dragon's Dogma 2* he...



ROBERT JONES
Specialist in
Looking too old for this
Currently playing
Outcast – A New Beginning
This month
Flew around PC Gamer Towers using a jetpack. Much beer was spilled.



OSCAR TAYLOR-KENT
Specialist in
Riding robodinos
Currently playing
Horizon Forbidden West
This month
Built his own robodino in his garage. Rode it to Maccy D's for nuggs.



TOM SYKES
Specialist in
Selecting power drive
Currently playing
Lee Carvalho's Putting Challenge 2
This month
Chose a three wood then pushed seven, eight, seven to swing.



MATT ELLIOTT
Specialist in
Hiding from ghost girls
Currently playing
FEAR
This month
Became permanently scared of ladders for no reason whatsoever. He's not crying, you are!



REVIEW

Dragon's Dogma 2



LT

LB

X

PAWN COCKTAIL

DRAGON'S DOGMA 2 is an exceptional and sometimes infuriating RPG

By Fraser Brown

My journey through *Dragon's Dogma 2* has been a tumultuous one: glorious, thrilling, accidentally hilarious, frustrating, maddening – all the adjectives. It is one of my favourite RPGs, but also a huge pain in the arse. Whatever you feel about it by the end of your own adventure, I guarantee this is a game that will be talked about for a long time.

You are the Arisen, a soldier killed by a dragon, returned to life despite the absence of a heart. Whenever the dragon appears, a new Arisen also appears, their fates intertwined.

The dragon is always destined to make an Arisen, and the Arisen is always destined to fight the dragon.

Except this time there's another claiming the title of Arisen, and with it the mantle of Sovran of Vermund – a

monarch, essentially – kicking off a political conspiracy that weaves its way through countless fights with massive monsters.

Despite constantly flinging flat characters and stiff dialogue at you – everyone's lines are laden with faux medieval affectations and po-faced seriousness – the story itself is a creative yarn that's so much more elaborate than it needs to be, given that much of the series' appeal comes from clambering on top of angry beasts and murdering them. While many of the main beats are predictable, the narrative is constructed in such a way that it still manages to feel incredibly novel, like a FromSoftware joint but with a story that is much more accessible and explicit.

That said, I couldn't give a toss about any of the scripted NPCs. There is a half-hearted romance and friendship system, where you can go on dates, while also giving and receiving gifts, but it feels dreadfully underbaked. The pawns, though, are a different matter. I would die for them. Especially my main boy, Gorbo the goblin.

PAWN SHOP

Pawns are your loyal, chatty companions, putting their lives on the line for you every day. There's your main pawn who will be with

you always, levelling up alongside their master, and then you can recruit two more made by other players or Capcom. These extra pawns won't level up while in your employ, so you'll be recruiting new ones

frequently, giving you a constantly changing cast of oddballs and eccentrics to pal around with. Your main pawn can be customised using

Pawns you've recruited share their knowledge with you

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open-world RPG sequel full of weird companions and gargantuan monsters

EXPECT TO PAY
£54

DEVELOPER
Capcom

PUBLISHER
Capcom

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i9-13900k, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 4090

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
dragonsdogma.com/2/

the same character creator you used to build your Arisen, and it's a joy to play around with. It's so detailed you can select individual teeth to remove. Every tattoo and scar can be resized, rotated, moved around and recoloured. By stretching and shrinking pretty much every single body part, you can make an Adonis or an abomination. Technically, you can only make humans and beastmen (big kitties), but you can unofficially create elves, orcs, goblins or your own unique nightmares.

Pawns are essential in combat, letting you shore up any of the weaknesses inherent in your own skillset. And they are generally very effective, apart from that one Fighter I recruited who was meant to throw me onto an ogre's back but instead chucked me off a mountain. Their practical applications extend well beyond brawls, though. Pawns you've recruited share their knowledge with you, pointing out caves and treasure chests they encountered with a previous master, marking them on your map. You can also give them commands, like directly helping you if you're injured or unconscious, or waiting in a specific spot. Pawns can even guide you on quests, which is especially handy given how vague quest descriptions can be.

Your own pawn can also learn new things when they're recruited by other players, so it pays to make them as attractive as possible. I don't mean you need to make a hottie – though that's certainly a strategy a lot of players employ – you just need to give players a reason to hire them. Giving them unlockable specialisations that make them forage, craft, sell unwanted goods or heal players will absolutely get them more gigs. They'll also unlock more esoteric knowledge through their own experiences. Recruiting a pawn who'd killed a bunch of ogres is how I know that ogres are obsessed with women, and will usually try to attack them first. Yep, ogres are incels.

MONSTER MASH

Ranking the most deadly monsters



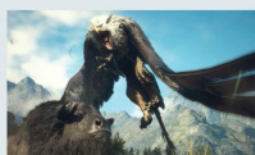
DRAKE

These big beasts are physically strong, can cast elemental spells and have nasty breath.



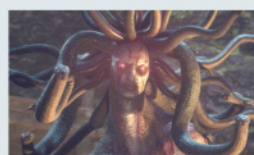
CHIMERA

These critters will poison you, silence your spellcasters and tear you a new one with their claws.



GRIFFIN

These big birds are cowards, really, but this means they'll fly away while you are on their back.



MEDUSA

This lady has a killer stare. Avoid it, though, and you'll be making snakeskin boots in no time.

Dragon's Dogma 2

There's something comforting about just hearing them chat away to each other, too, or share bits of gossip about their other masters. Like how they only ever travel with beastren, or exclusively fill their party with women. It feels like being in a proper RPG adventuring group, and each journey is made better by their companionship and funny little eccentricities.

RAMBLING

The world of *Dragon's Dogma 2* is vast, with two main regions – one covered in forests and fields, the other scorching and arid, punctuated by the occasional oasis – as well as a smaller volcanic island that you'll likely only visit near the end of the game. Its vastness is not simply down to its literal size, though – there are plenty of other RPGs blessed with a greater scale and more densely packed. What makes *Dragon's Dogma 2* feel gargantuan is the limitations placed on fast travel.

Only a few locations have fixed fast travel points (you also get a small number of portable ones you can plonk down), and then you can only use them if you've found a ferrystone. By the end you'll probably have quite a few, but the system discourages you from using them often. A few settlements also feature an ox cart, essentially a taxi service that you need to pay for. While on the cart, you can doze off, making travel instantaneous, but you might also be set upon by monsters, forcing you to defend the cart lest it be destroyed.

The camping system is, low key, one of the most impactful additions to travelling around the world. Campsites are dotted all over the map, allowing you to take a kip and cook up a meal, netting you a variety of bonuses. The real boon, though, is that it allows you to escape the dreaded hours between sunset and

sunrise. Nighttime adventures can be thrilling, but sometimes you don't want to run through a pitch-black forest with your lantern only giving you a mere glimpse of the threats ahead of you. You still need a tent, however,

and while tents technically have infinite uses, enemies can raid your campsite and destroy them.

So there are more conveniences than the original game, but the concept of slow and methodical exploration is undeniably maintained. Indeed, thanks to camping you're encouraged to spend even more time in the wilderness. If I'm in a rush, there are alternatives, but so much of what makes *Dragon's Dogma 2* memorable happens when you're on a long journey.

This is a game made up of thousands of random adventures, often in locations you're not explicitly told to visit. Sure, there are a multitude of quests, but these are less of a driving force behind exploration than your own desire to see the world. Exploration also spits out some fun environmental puzzles, mostly relating to how to reach tantalising chests or dungeon entrances. Mages and Sorcerers can

levitate, which often proves to be the solution. But you might also need to hitch a ride on a harpy, toss a pawn, or deploy some explosives. There's usually more than one way to get to where you need to go, and that includes parts of the critical path, allowing you to creatively skip some steps and uncover alternate routes.

When you are on a quest, they often forgo explicit instructions, and even when you do get quest markers they might just point you towards a large area rather than a specific location, so exploring on your own initiative is essential. A lot of the time, this is great! *Dragon's Dogma 2* expects you to engage your brain and actually solve problems. But then there are those times when you'll be staring at your monitor at 2am, screaming, "Just tell me where to go!" I have been there and it sucks.

DAZED AND CONFUSED

Dragon's Dogma 2 sometimes makes me feel like I'm going mad. Some quests are just so obstinately vague that you just have to hope you stumble onto a solution. I have had many long discussions with Sean, who's been writing a lot of our *Dragon's Dogma 2* guides, where neither of us can figure out if we've missed something or we've been the victim of a bug – sometimes it's both!

For instance, one of the vocations I wanted to try out was Mystic Spearhand. This is an Arisen-specific class, so pawns can't use it, and it mixes both martial and magical skills to devastating effect. You can use telekinesis to lift up debris and small enemies, magically dash towards foes or up into the air, create arcane shields that deflect all damage, and simply go to town on a foe with your deadly, spinning duospear. But I had no idea how to unlock it.

It was only after speaking with Capcom that I realised a conversation didn't trigger after a fight. I was meant to meet the fella who'd unlock the vocation for me, but that never happened. And he was no longer in that village. Eventually I found him in another village and finally unlocked the vocation – lots of fun ensued. But it would have simply been impossible to figure this out myself.

It's worth noting that after a certain point, near the end of the game, the locations of these NPCs are revealed, but I've encountered plenty more issues which have no

The camping system is, low key, one of the most impactful additions

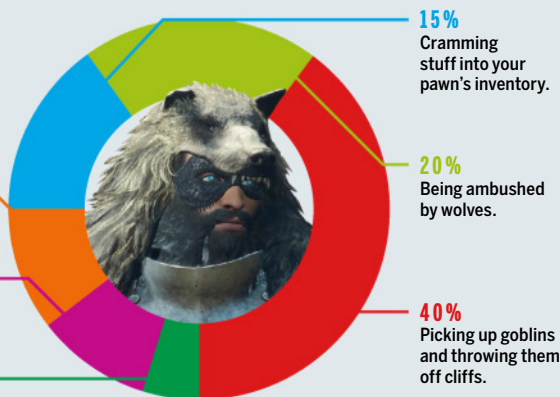
VENTURE FORTH

An average journey

10% Getting lost in dungeons.

10% Climbing on top of huge monsters.

5% Staring at live action cooking sequences.



Have you heard of nail clippers, buddy?

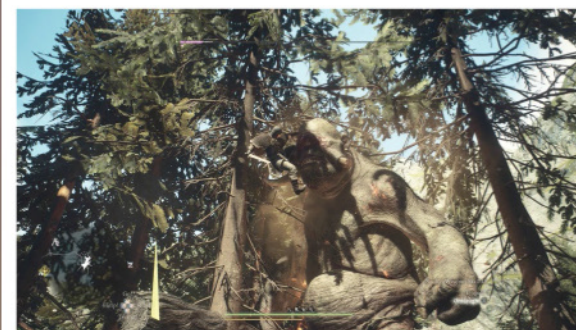


FAR LEFT: Well, I'm getting squashed I guess.

LEFT: Who needs a sword when you've got a tornado?

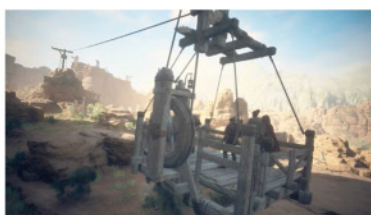
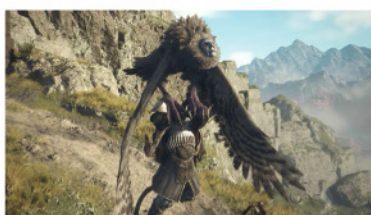


There's always something happening in town.



RIGHT: This is still more comfortable than flying Economy.

FAR RIGHT: "I'm sure this rickety bridge is safe!" It was not.



Is there anything more satisfying than popping massive dragon boils?

resolution. There are a couple of extremely powerful spells, for example, that it looks like I'll never be able to use until a fix is deployed. These are connected to an elaborate quest that simply stalls at the end for me, trapping the NPC in a loop. I tested this quest in my second playthrough and the bug persisted, though my colleague Sean managed to get through it with no issues, so your experience could vary.

Playing again has revealed just how much I missed the first time around, not because I didn't explore enough, but because quests didn't work as intended. I've also discovered new issues, where quests that worked before have broken down. Often the problem lies with NPCs, who might not show up when they are meant to, or will simply vanish when they should be following you.

Then there are the performance issues. For the first few hours, *Dragon's Dogma 2* ran perfectly on my extremely beefy rig, but the moment I hit Vermund's capital things dramatically changed. In the wilderness, it's 80-100fps, but in the city it rarely gets much higher than 60fps and often dips to 40fps or lower. That's on a PC that should be able to handle anything.

MONSTER HUNTER

Every time I've wanted to take a break because I've been stumped or run afoul of a bug, *Dragon's Dogma 2* drags me back in. And a monster is usually responsible. I've killed so many of them by now, but the elation I feel when I set fire to an ogre, push a cyclops off a cliff, or get trapped on the back of a griffin as it flies to the other side of the map has yet to subside. Usually, these are surprises rather than scripted events. Monsters have their own lives, duking it out with NPCs, hunting other creatures, or taking a well-earned nap. And then you show up and murder them. Who's the real monster, eh? It's the monsters. The monsters are the real monsters.

The combat system is just so phenomenally tactile and kinetic, where each fight becomes a product of countless decisions and environmental factors. At its most

basic, that might just mean grabbing a loose boulder and chucking it at a dragon. But what if there are no boulders? Well, maybe you should summon a wall of ice, which you can then smash, and now you've got some massive ice cubes to throw around. Whenever you bump into a monster, it's a new opportunity to

experiment, and the ease with which you can switch vocations and recruit new pawns means the party dynamic is always changing.

Archers have that deadly precision, effortlessly hitting

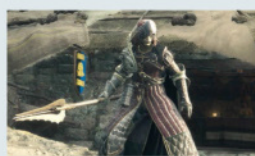
those lovely weak spots before legging it to avoid the long reach of an ogre or a dragon's nasty breath. Sorcerers have god-like powers, summoning screen-filling tornados or the aforementioned walls of ice – not just damaging enemies, but also allowing their teammates to take advantage of the high ground, leaping from the ice wall, blade at the ready, before shoving it into a monster's face. The melee classes, meanwhile, are at their most delightful when using enemies like climbing frames, scurrying all over them and looking for a soft part to repeatedly stab.

Every vocation has a meaty list of skills, though only four can be slotted into your loadout at a given time.

The combat system is just so phenomenally tactile and kinetic

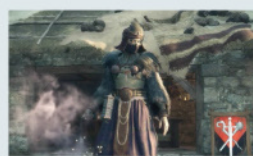
ARISE

Pick the right Arisen-specific vocation



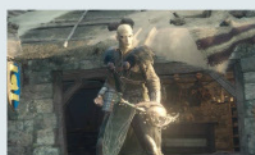
MYSTIC SPEARHAND

A versatile mix of martial and magical abilities that lets you dash towards enemies.



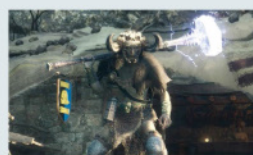
TRICKSTER

A complex support class that uses smoke and illusions to befuddle and manipulate.



MAGICK ARCHER

A mix of Archer and Mage, this ranged vocation means you'll always hit your target.



WARFARER

The ultimate vocation, this lets you wield every weapon, piece of gear and skill in the game.

That's still one more than the first game, at least. And it feels like plenty, especially when you consider all the extra utility pawns offer. On top of your four slotted weapon skills, you've got each vocation's core skills – like the Mage's group heals, or the Mystic Spearhand's stun, which can be upgraded to include a follow-up that lets you magically dash towards the stunned enemy.

As you level up you'll also unlock augments for each vocation, and these can still be used when you switch to another one. Some of these are combat-specific, like the Mystic Spearhand's Polarity augment, which buffs their martial attacks during the day and their magical attacks at night, but others have broader applications, like the Sorcerer's augment that slows down the rate of plants and food rotting in your inventory. This allows you to concoct unique builds and encourages you to experiment with different vocations instead of staying in your comfort zone, allowing you to really experience the impressive breadth of the class system.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN

I finished *Dragon's Dogma 2* at 7am after an all-nighter that I deemed necessary because, oh boy, what a climax. I should have gone to bed, but instead I immediately started a new game, resetting the story but keeping most of my items and all of my levels. I then proceeded to play for five more hours before I literally passed out.

This is extremely unhealthy and you should not do this, but I wanted to share this embarrassing anecdote about a 38-year-old man ignoring all good sense, because – aside from showing how terrible I am at making decisions – it encapsulates how much *Dragon's Dogma 2* has me in its grip better than the thousands of words above it. Yes, it's janky. Yes, it's going to need some patches to fix the performance issues and bugs. And even then it's going to be a pain in the arse because of some very annoying quests. But bloody hell do I love this weird, ambitious RPG. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Dragon's Dogma 2 is a magnificent adventure with impressive fights and some incredibly rough edges.

89

JEDI REMASTER

DARK FORCES REMASTER is the classic Star Wars FPS upgrade you've been looking for

By Robert Jones

A long time ago, in a PC gaming age that now feels far, far away... there was the mid-1990s rush of *Doom* clones. And, truth be told, most of them were pretty poor imitations that brought nothing new to the genre. But, where these derivative FPSes failed, LucasArts' 1995 *Star Wars: Dark Forces* succeeded, and not just in terms of its own quality, but also in terms of how it evolved the FPS genre in a large number of ways.

So it's been puzzling that a game which, as we've chronicled before, largely introduced cinematic narrative storytelling to FPS games, established a new standard for realistic level design theory, and gave us graphics and audio that outstripped what *Doom* delivered, has never been officially remastered. Enter Nightdive Studios.

For those who have missed Nightdive's recent activities, it's the talented team behind the high-scoring *System Shock* remake, as well as a wide range of remasters of classic games including *Quake 2*, *Turok 3* and *Blade Runner*, all of which have been well received. I think it's fair to say that Nightdive is the foremost remastering studio in business today.

And that's great news here, as the quick take away from this *Star Wars: Dark Forces Remaster* review is that this is a great remaster, with the classic LucasArts game not only brought back to modern systems, but brought back with many enhancements and extras that make it the definitive version to play.

Thanks to Nightdive's KEX Engine, which for this remaster has been fed the game's original Jedi Engine code, the remaster offers vast improvements to resolution and framerate, with up to 4K 120fps supported. Widescreen and ultra-widescreen aspect ratios are also unlocked, too. However, to just talk about simple res and framerate bumps is to undersell this remaster.

That's because Nightdive has gone and delivered fresh high-res assets

for everything in the game, from character sprites to textures, as well as improvements to lighting and how the game is rendered. There's also the option to swap between rendering

modes at will, as well as turn on and off the higher-res assets. Nightdive has even remastered the game's cinematics, which also can be toggled between old and new. This means you can experience the game, if

desired, with almost the exact look and feel of playing the original.

And I really think how *Dark Forces Remaster* feels is key here. What Nightdive should be applauded most for is preserving the look and feel of the original. A new, upgraded visual experience has been delivered, but not at the expense of the game's character or how it plays.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A remaster of the iconic 1995 LucasArts FPS, *Star Wars: Dark Forces*

EXPECT TO PAY
TBA

DEVELOPER
Nightdive Studios, LucasArts

PUBLISHER
Nightdive Studios

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5700X, 32GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3090 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
nightdivestudios.com

FEEL THE FORCE

However, where *Dark Forces Remaster* looks new, the experience it offers is firmly old-school FPS – including all the limitations of that. As Rebel hero Kyle Katarn, your job is to repeatedly run and gun your way through 14 levels, ranging from secret Imperial bases to starships, subterranean sewer systems, robotics facilities and more. These environments are often complex and multi-layered, and many require backtracking in order to navigate them and progress. Getting lost will happen. I can imagine PC gamers brought up on waypoints and navigation trails could balk.

Key cards are absolutely a thing in *Dark Forces Remaster*, too, so when you're not blasting Stormtroopers you spend plenty of time searching corridors for Imperial Officers to gun down and relieve of, say, the Blue Key Card or Red Key Card or Yellow Key Card. Again, balking may occur, especially if the gamer misses that semi-hidden wall switch that prevents progress.

Rarely there's some light platforming to engage in, such as jumping over a few platforms or escaping a garbage compactor, and there are some environmental puzzles to solve, but mostly this is a game that boils down to running around shooting Stormtroopers.

The end result, then, is a great remaster of a game that offers – very strictly – a mid-1990s FPS experience. If you like/liked that experience then you'll love this, as *Dark Forces Remaster* is the definitive version of this game to play. But if modern FPS trappings are what you're used to, and have no love for the original, you'll likely be left wanting. ■

A MORE CIVILISED AGE

Three other classic Star Wars PC games



STAR WARS: X-WING VS. TIE FIGHTER
1997

Somehow this is still the closest we've got to a multiplayer Star Wars game where you can live out your Red Five fighter pilot fantasies among the stars. Pew pew pew!



STAR WARS JEDI KNIGHT II: THE JEDI OUTCAST
2002

Yes, *Dark Forces 2* would be good, but it is *Jedi Knight II*, the game that followed it that became even more iconic. Using a lightsaber has never felt better.



STAR WARS KNIGHTS OF THE OLD REPUBLIC
2003

The *Star Wars* RPG from BioWare remains to this day the best *Star Wars* game. A remake has been rumoured, but a quality remaster would be fantastic.

PC GAMER

VERDICT

A great remaster of a beloved, if now very old-school, FPS that is handled with great care and attention.

78

"I find your lack of PC gaming faith disturbing."



FAR LEFT: Another Imperial Officer bites the space dust.

LEFT: Back in 1995 this 3D holographic Death Star was a real WOW moment.

BELOW: Kyle crashes the big end-of-year Stormtrooper disco.



CUTTER STAID

OUTCAST – A NEW BEGINNING rekindles the original game's epic scope

By Robert Jones

There's a fundamental contradiction between how *Outcast – A New Beginning* looks and sounds to how it actually plays. Visually, it's often epic. The alien world of Adelpha has never looked better, with Pandora-lite environments seamlessly alternating between lush forests, coastal beachfronts, rocky mountainous expanses, snow-capped peaks and waterfall-laden ancient metropolises partially reclaimed by nature. The audio is also beautiful and atmospheric – it always speaks of wondrous cosmic adventures that await. What a shame, then, that hero of the hour Cutter Slade spends so much of his time in *Outcast – A New Beginning* undertaking very mundane, far from epic, open-world busywork.

Here's a typical sort of exchange. Cutter Slade, ex-Navy SEAL and now, after far too long trapped on the alien world of Adelpha, haggard-looking dad bod chosen one, goes to alien Talan A because Talan B has told him he needs to for plot purposes. Talan A, after lengthy dialogue, much of which welcomes the skip button, reveals he can help Cutter but only after the cosmic space adventurer has gone to D to gather X amounts of Z. But D can't be accessed until Talan C has been helped with Y. And so on and so on.

These tasks vary in mundanity, ranging from escort missions (such as slowly guiding Twon-Ha space ostriches, who constantly need you to double back if you get even a little bit too far from them), to item collecting missions (grab 10 space fruits), to straight-out domestic chores (herding 12 space cows into a pen). At multiple times there are mechanics where, for a location's main plot to be advanced, you literally have to go gather a certain amount of resources and walk up to a table/pot/bench with a 0/10 amount indicator floating above it, and feed the resources into it. In these moments, progression is straightforward courier work while watching virtual numbers go up. Go get 10 bug larvae, return to pot, put larvae in pot. Wow! Now I feel like a kick-ass ex-Navy SEAL space adventurer for sure.

Adelpha is being plundered for its natural resources

It's an odd and slightly deflating experience, and especially so after the game's initial wind-up jolts you into the game's out-of-this-world setting, story and gameplay mechanics in a pretty choppy opening 30 minutes,

replete with disorientating cinematics and a functional but trite tutorial. I just about hung on as I'd got the background of what came before in the original *Outcast* lodged in my memory, but it

did make me wonder what a completely fresh gamer would think.

Luckily, by the time the opening part of *Outcast – A New Beginning* is over, the key plot points are clearer:

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A sequel to the 1999 classic action adventure game, *Outcast*

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Appeal Studios

PUBLISHER
THQ Nordic

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5700X,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 3090 Ti

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
outcast.thqnordic.com

Adelpha is being plundered by baddies for its natural resources and the native Talan aliens are essentially enslaved and powerless to stop this. Luckily, Cutter, who is desperately trying to get back home, can help achieve this by aiding the Talans in two main ways: one is to help bring life to Adelpha (by doing much busywork that a Talan mating festival can take place) and the other is to bring death to the invaders and kick them out. Progressing both of these macro plots splits the game down the middle content-wise, really, with one side naturally leaning a lot towards combat missions and the other more towards exploration, communicating with locals and, yes, fetch quest busywork. Do bits of both of these things in each Adelpha village and Cutter will get the support he needs from the village chief. Once all chiefs have signed up then... yeah, you see how this works.

Being candid, while this game's combat is solid (we'll get to that later), this core game structure, which almost revels in open-world chores and stuffed dialogue wheels, would not survive one moment if it were not for this game's excellent and empowering movement, which comes courtesy of Cutter's jetpack. This jetpack, which you get right from the start of the game and can be upgraded in a number of cool ways, seriously lightens the load when undertaking yet another uninspired quest, as it makes exploration and travel really fun.

JETPACK JOYRIDE

Cutter can boost jump with his jetpack (multiple times with a few upgrades), hover at speed over the surface of Adelpha (including water, which is really cool), and even take full flight in bursts. It's like Alloy's glidey parachute mechanic in the *Horizon* sequel but far cooler and more useful. Gain height with the jetpack and you can dive towards the ground and then swoop like a bird,

THE OUTCAST JOURNEY SO FAR

A timeline of Cutter's adventures



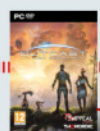
OUTCAST 1999

The original game was wildly ambitious in scope, seeing ex-Navy SEAL Cutter Slade jumping to a new dimension and exploring the beautiful alien world of Adelpha.



OUTCAST - SECOND CONTACT 2017

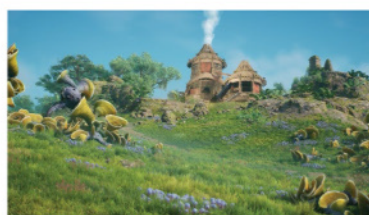
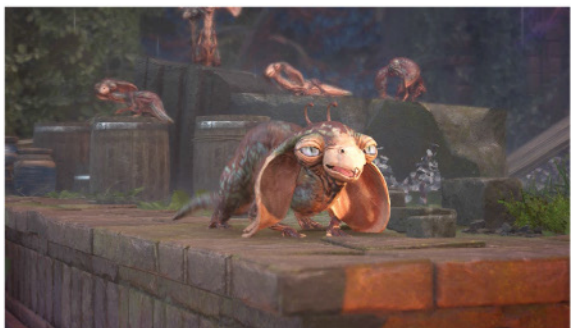
Long after the original sequel to *Outcast* was canned, a full remake of the original game was released with improved graphics and controls.



OUTCAST – A NEW BEGINNING 2024

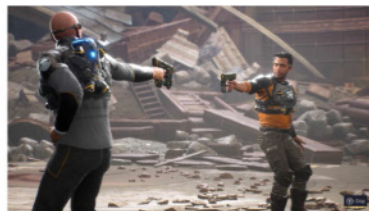
This year's release is technically *Outcast 2*, featuring an older Cutter Slade still on Adelpha and still trying to desperately get back home to Earth.

Cutter's got serious
'I'm too old for this
shit' dad vibes.



FAR LEFT: Using Cutter's jetpack to gain high ground is a smart combat tactic.

LEFT: Adelpha looks beautiful a lot of the time, with epic vistas, shimmering waters and lush foliage.



BELOW: The native Talans are being oppressed by the game's evildoers.



(Y) Skip



ABOVE: Weapons can be customised and modified in many ways.

FAR RIGHT: Rescuing imprisoned Talans is but one of many side-activities.



Occasionally there are arena-based boss fights. They're ok.



only to regain height, and do the whole thing again. Upgrade the jetpack to the backend of its ability tree and you can scream around Adelpha like *The Rocketeer*, which is bang on point for *Outcast*'s classic sci-fi adventure feel.

Indeed, I would argue that the jetpack is the thing that really helps

replicate some of the original *Outcast*'s expansive wonder. In the original game it was mind-blowing to think that if you could see somewhere in one of its interconnected worlds then you could reach it, while each shimmering portal offered a magic door to another wondrous realm. In *A New Beginning*, the jetpack is your key to reaching those epic-looking lands that you can see in the distance, or way up high in the sky, and unlike the original, there are no loading screens between areas. This is one big open world and the jetpack lets Cutter fly about all of it. Portals, of which there are many, are really just pretty shortcuts.

At least Appeal, the developer here, seems to realise this, and has built in a large number of jetpack time trials to enjoy. These involve discovering a trial's starting point (a magic space bulb) and then following a glowing trail successfully without crashing or getting shot out of the sky. Reach the bulb and you can slash it open for points that can go towards upgrading or unlocking new abilities. I found myself drawn to these trials and they tapped into the best part of the game. Crucially, there

is never a dialogue wheel or item collection bucket in sight. It's pure boosting, gliding and flying around a pretty alien world, and that's alright by me.

On the ground the jetpack proves useful, too, allowing Cutter to essentially long jump by pressing the dash button and then the jump

button in sequence.

This sees Cutter hurled in any direction at great speed and is great for jumping over expanses or, more critically, closing ground on enemies or dodging their attacks in combat scenarios.

The jetpack is your key to reaching those epic-looking lands

EXTREME PREJUDICE

Combat in *Outcast – A New Beginning* is a third-person over-the-shoulder affair that feels like *Mass Effect: Andromeda* but without a cover system. Cutter has an energy shield (which can also be used as a melee weapon) to block incoming fire and then a small arsenal of pistols and rifles to dispatch evil robotic types or hostile native beasts.

Weapon customisation is a highlight of *Outcast*. Every slot has mod slots, and if you get a specific ability you can even upgrade those slots. When you factor in the wide array of mods, there's a lot a player can do to tailor their loadout to their tastes/playstyle.

For example, certain mods will make it so a weapon will slightly heal Cutter on a kill, while others allow ammunition to automatically home in on targets, largely taking aiming out of the question (the game's auto

lock-on is supremely generous by default). Other mods let weapons fire explosive mines, reduce cooldowns, make the weapon fire multiple rounds at once, improve damage against a specific type of enemy, enhance the firing rate, boost damage dealt close to overheating and so on. There's loads of options and you can chop and change your loadout.

With these weapons Cutter is tasked with eradicating enemy facilities, either to shut them down and rob them of their energy cores, or to free prisoners who are being held hostage. It's standard go here, clear this, loot that stuff, but it is still pretty satisfying to undertake. Weapons have punch, and when you factor in the dodging and manoeuvring options Cutter's jetpack delivers, fights can be quite dynamic. Occasionally there is a boss fight, but you're doing the same sort of stuff. Dodging attacks and shooting vulnerable points. Enemy bases are of course filled with space chests, which provide upgrade points.

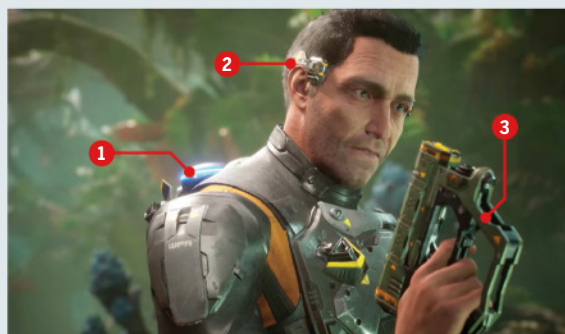
When Cutter's not shooting enemy robots he's clearing hostile native beast nests that have spread over Adelpha. These play very much like the monster nests in *The Witcher 3: Wild Hunt*. You go to an area, and have to kill a set number of creatures, destroy some creature nests, then blow up the central infestation. These are repetitive as the creatures have very basic attack patterns and only prove any sort of challenge because there are so many of them. It's more a case of shooting random moving things until there's nothing left moving. It's not very epic at all.

OLD DOG, OLD TRICKS

Outcast – A New Beginning is a perfectly serviceable open-world game – one that plays to the heritage of the series in terms of its pretty world and musical score, as well as '70s space adventure comic vibes and tone. But while its presentation is new, the experience beneath it, in general, is not. Not bad by any means, but this is unadventurous open world gaming that, jetpack aside, you've experienced before. ■

CUTTER'S COSMIC ARSENAL

Key gear for exploring Adelpha



1 JETPACK

The jetpack lets Cutter boost, glide and fly around at speed.

2 VISOR

Cutter's iconic visor allows him to scan the environment for items and information.

3 PISTOL

Cutter's starting pistol is versatile and can be customised and upgraded.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A pleasing world and satisfying jetpack exploration aside, Cutter Slade's return is rarely out of this world.

69

VIVE LA RESISTANCE!

Be the deadly dagger in Nazi-occupied France in **CLASSIFIED: FRANCE '44**

By Robert Zak

For me, the best battles in turn-based tactics games are the ones where the momentum can shift on one perfectly executed turn; those pivotal moments when you harness the abilities that you maybe forgot even existed when things were going smoothly, but suddenly justify their existence in one audacious sequence of manoeuvres that imbue the orderly grid-based combat with the cinematic splendour of backs-to-the-wall movies.

Here's a case in point in Absolutely Games' World War II XCOM-like *Classified: France '44*. My merry band of spec-ops resistance fighter archetypes – the French woman with a beret, the bourbon-loving American, the 'chin up, cheerio' Brit, you get the picture – have just planted several demolition charges on a German U-boat, and are now pinned down by the Gestapo reinforcements arriving on the scene. One of our own is down, while another two have had their morale shattered under a fusillade of gunfire, and are due to miss their turns trembling helplessly in the 'broken' state.

My solitary available soldier that turn, our all-American hero Cassidy, issues a rallying cry, which recovers enough morale for my two broken fighters to get back into the fight. One

of those, Lili 'Wolf' Pierry, shouts to our fallen ally to "Quit messing about," which revives him from across the battlefield, before she leaps over a barrier and unleashes a volatile

shotgun blast that downs not only a German officer, but the medic standing next to him. Next, our freshly revived soldier Alami uses his limited AP to set up overwatch with his machine gun, bolstered by a skill that

means his overwatch doesn't break after shooting just one enemy. Come the Nazis' next turn, two more of their number will fall to Alami's gunfire, turning the tide of battle.

Classified is a refreshingly forgiving game for the genre, giving you ample opportunities to shift the momentum both within battle and in the wider campaign, where you have 50 days to cause as much disruption

The factions are a cool concept, but lack a bit of dynamism

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An XCOM-like tactics game set in the days leading up to the D-Day landings in 1944

EXPECT TO PAY
£35

DEVELOPER
Absolutely Games

PUBLISHER
Team17, Fireshine Games

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7 5800H, 16GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce RTX 3070

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
team17.com/games/classified-france-44

to Third Reich operations in northern France before the D-Day landings in Normandy. There is no permadeath here, presumably because each of your recruits is a preset character whose stories the devs wanted to tell. Each soldier pretty much has two lives in battle, as losing all their health the first time puts them into 'recovering' mode, where enemies kindly ignore them for three turns after which they can re-enter the fray; certain skills that revive fallen allies and restore morale apply to all units irrespective of where they are on the battlefield; and levelling up is swift, letting you easily specialise in two or more of the four skill branches that each class possesses.

NORMAL DIFFICULTY

On normal difficulty, the campaign feels tense but never overwhelming, nor does it reach that dreaded point where you realise some 20 hours in that you're utterly screwed and have condemned Europe to Nazi occupation. The campaign sees you capturing regions for the French resistance, each of which is inhabited by one of three factions that you build loyalty with to gain access to better weapons and equipment in the shops. You do this using the in-game currency of 'supplies', which can also be used to cure wounds, retrain troops, and earn FFI points – which disrupt enemies – between missions.

The factions are a cool concept, but lack a bit of dynamism. There's some cutscene chatter about how France is split between these squabbling factions, but that doesn't really manifest in the game. Siding with one faction doesn't lose you favour with another, and there are no special events or characters that better acquaint you with the Gaullists, Rebels or Criminals. The factions are really just loyalty bars that fill up as you help each of them out. Occasionally you'll have a choice of missions where you need to choose whether to aid one faction or

RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

How much time you spend doing what in Classified

52% COMBAT

It's only right that you spend most of your time engaged in combat.

32% SNEAKING

The sneaking system diversifies missions, but its slow pace does hog a little much.

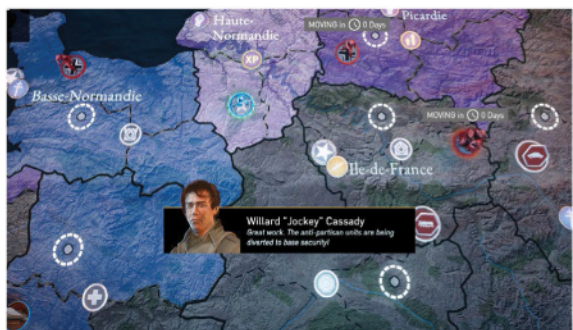
14% CAMPAIGNING

The campaign could've had a little more airtime with events and faction politics.

2% CHIT-CHAT

Could've been more, could've been better.



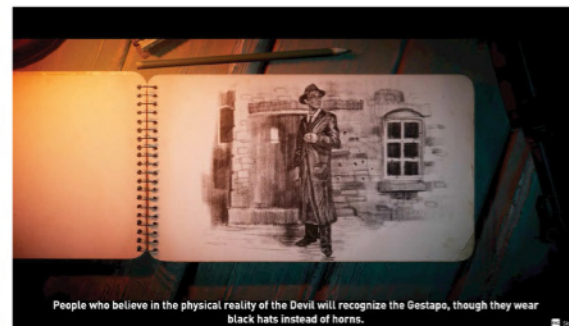


ABOVE: Chats between your troops don't offer much in the way of characterisation.

LEFT: Nothing quite like getting up close and personal with a knife and a Nazi.

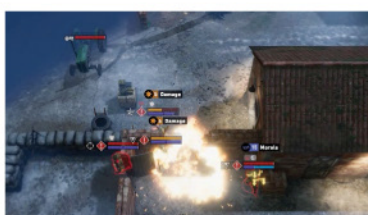


The graphics may not look like much up close, but the action has a solid, scrappy quality to it.



RIGHT: The morale system means that you're always dealing damage, even if it's indirect.

FAR RIGHT: Capturing regions for the resistance and toppling Gestapo pawns on the campaign map



Interior environments have a nice level of period-appropriate detail up close.

another, or to save one potential recruit or another, but none of this fleshes out or branches the narrative, which feels like a missed opportunity.

As you build up resistance strength through your derring-do missions – which span the gamut of spec-ops shenanigans we've seen in WWII movies over the years, from stealing documents to sinking U-Boats, to taking out officers and fending off waves of enemies while holed up in a countryside manor – the enemy will increase their strength. Gestapo officers, who move around as little pawns on the map, reinforce enemies in a given area and launch reprisals against regions you've captured, forcing you to repair those regions using soldiers you don't plan on using in your next mission.

A bit like with the faction system, it's a cool idea with a somewhat lightweight implementation, as these Gestapo units are fairly easy to subdue using FFI points, and they can't actively retake territory you've already captured. The intensity ramps up steadily in the campaign, but not quite enough to offer the same dramatic momentum shifts as in the battles themselves.

Down on the battlefield however, things feel great. It's not a perfect simulation by any means – expect to see a few bullets magically passing through walls right before your eyes, in defiance of the game's absence of destructible scenery – but the tactical gunplay is a blast.

Your movement and actions are all bundled into one pool of action points, and beyond your health you also have a morale bar. Drop down to half morale, and you become suppressed; lose all your morale and you become broken, forcing that soldier to skip a turn. It works both ways, and there's a good thrill to running out of ammo with your primary weapon, switching out to your pistol, and firing at the enemy with 0% chance of hitting them, just to chip away at their morale, or to try and blow up a nearby truck or barrel. It feels like every shot counts, even if it doesn't do direct damage, which means no AP gets wasted and the combat has a satisfyingly scrappy quality you might expect in a real shootout.

I appreciate the inclusion of a stealth system as well. You can insta-kill unaware enemies with a knife, and there are dedicated stealth missions which are best accomplished by you going unnoticed, as well as Ambush missions where, if you successfully carry out a certain number of stealth

kills, you'll gain an extra turn to ambush your enemies as soon as they become aware. While in stealth mode, you see enemy vision cones and where they're going to move next, giving missions a nice puzzle-game layer

before all hell breaks loose. The robust skill tree even allowed me to build one of my soldiers into something of a beret-wearing ninja, delivering critical-damage knife attacks and regaining AP after each successful kill.

ISSUE WITH THE STEALTH

An issue with the stealth, and the pace of battles in general, is the stodgy movement and animations. Your troops move slowly, and there's an inelegant pause as they switch animations between moving around and diving into and over cover. A movement speed option (like you

Down on the battlefield itself however, things feel great

have with enemies) and better-flowing animations would've helped the quieter parts of missions feel a bit less protracted.

While the focus is very much on ballsy battlefield exploits and the campaign, I always appreciate XCOM-like that take the time to build a bit of a relationship between the soldiers. XCOM 2 had the bonding mechanic, where you could increase cohesion between soldiers by sending them out on missions together, while *Marvel's Midnight Suns* went pretty deep on building interpersonal relationships between missions. *Classified* is lacking in this area, and while you can trigger a conversation between two soldiers, it's more about little bickerings over French/American/British cultural norms like tea vs coffee than character building.

In fairness, some of the chats are pretty interesting, as you hear about the Moroccan Alami's concerns over French occupation after the war, or how butter has somehow become a more valuable commodity than meat in these troubled times. It makes for some neat history trivia, but doesn't add up to the meaningful characterisation you'd have hoped for with a fixed cast of characters like this.

But it's also the case that Absolutely Games doesn't have the resources of Firaxis (*Midnight Suns* and *XCOM*), and this is a commendable debut effort from the new studio. It ticks all the boxes on the battlefield itself, and toys with some neat mechanics and ideas that the studio can hopefully build upon in its next outing. Contrary to being the hardcore game that its severe historical setting might have suggested, *Classified: France '44* has a lot of thoughtful, forgiving touches that push you along through the momentous historical events that you become part of shaping, ratcheting things up as you approach the fateful Normandy landings. It may even be a bit on the easy side by default, but hey, it wouldn't be a true XCOM-like if it didn't have an Ironman mode for all you tactics veterans out there. ■

WEIRD WAR 2

Some weirder war-themed tactics games



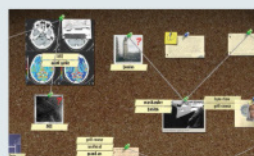
VALKYRIA CHRONICLES
Valkyria Chronicles' story and setting is still inspired by Europe's turbulent history in the first half of the 20th century.



SILENT STORM
What starts as a grounded tactics game later introduces energy weapons, power armour and other retro-futuristic gadgetry.



ACHTUNG! CTHULHU TACTICS
Cthulhu Tactics introduces some fun systems like sanity as you unearth eldritch horrors.



PHANTOM DOCTRINE
Assuming all goes well in your mission to sabotage the Nazis, you can flow into that next epoch of history: The Cold War.

PC GAMER VERDICT

A suspenseful yet forgiving turn-based tactics game that lets you play a part in shaping history

75

OLD WORLD BLUES

The beautiful **HORIZON: FORBIDDEN WEST COMPLETE EDITION** struggles to move on

By Oscar Taylor-Kent

Cor! Look at those swaying aquatic plants as you dive underwater, ready to hide from mechanical foes. Look at the neon lights that form the cyber-ghost of Las Vegas above the post-apocalyptic dunes! *Horizon: Forbidden West* is a technical tour de force for Guerrilla Games and its Decima Engine. But, while the tech has certainly evolved, little else has, making for a disappointing sequel in a series that was once packed with promise.

The gorgeous visuals at least make this a game that feels right at home on PC, where its ambition can be pushed further. With a good enough rig, this port can meet and exceed what's still one of PS5's most resource hungry titles – able to match its speedy open-world fast travel, and deliver higher framerates while retaining a good level of detail. DualSense and ultrawide support sweeten the deal. Even on less powerful machines, this is a game that runs well and feels responsive in action.

Even on my relatively mid-level rig, it was great to see how well the game ran at 1440p with a 144hz refresh, the DLSS making the graphics a treat on High, and

definitely outperforming my PS5 experience on the same 1440p monitor. The settings are well implemented too, offering a clever overlay over the game rather than just a menu, so you can see the visuals update as you make your adjustments. I only experienced some slowdown in especially busy set-pieces, and occasionally for a moment when loading into a big area.

What is noticeable is how the performance tanks as soon as you reach the DLC expansion *Burning Shores*. The included DLC was only available on PS5 on consoles, eschewing the PS4 release. If there was ever any doubt as to why, the reasoning is clear in this port. The denser foliage, large amounts of

It was great to see how well the game ran at 1440p with a 144hz refresh

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The high-tech sequel to PlayStation's premier open world robo-basher

EXPECT TO PAY
£50

DEVELOPER
Guerrilla Games, Nixxes

PUBLISHER
PlayStation

REVIEWED ON
AMD Ryzen 7800X3D,
32GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 2080
Super

MULTIPLAYER
No

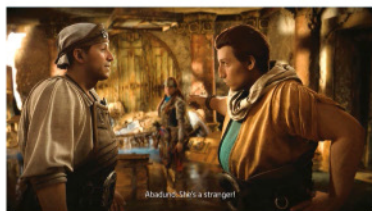
LINK
store.steampowered.com/app/2420110/82_Forbidden_West_Complete_Edition/

water, and hordes of enemies forced me to adjust settings down to keep a steady framerate. Though it has to be said the game still looks good even on its lowest settings, with details like the parts on machines still clearly visible. There's some very solid art direction underneath all the sheen.

PAST HORIZONS

Aloy's first journey was more than the sum of its robotic parts. Saving a new civilisation risen from the post-apocalyptic ashes of humanity's own hubris, Aloy used that dead world's knowledge to put the past to bed and allow the new world to flourish anew, living alongside its nature-reclaimed cities and animal-like machines. But rather than following that through, *Forbidden West* feels just as obsessed with replicating what came before as some of its antagonists. The first game's genuinely intriguing world begins to feel repetitive. A new land, new cultures, and new cast of characters still ends up feeling like a game going through the motions.

The main threat here feels like it's stepped out of a different sci-fi world – all slick, curved metal and personal



ABOVE: There's a lot of lengthy dialogue scenes, but this time there's fewer shot-reverse-shot exchanges.

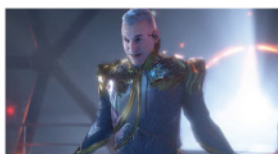


Tremortusks are heavily armoured. So shave 'em off.



TOP: Zero-in on a machine's many components to knock them off, debilitating them and getting you more loot.

ABOVE: Gliding is more about allowing you to descend safely than cross vast distances.



forcefields – that doesn't gel with one where tactile dino-robots with exposed moving parts roam. It's aesthetically jarring, and it feels like it undermines what made *Horizon* special to begin with.

It's harder to get behind Aloy's quest here too, as she seems world-weary to a deflating degree – if she's not invested any more, why should I be? The game's tutorial questline is about breaking up a union work stoppage, and she keeps aggressively butting heads with other characters from there – often coming off like a caricature of a smug atheist, thanks to her knowledge about the truth behind the machine gods many of the world's culture's revere.

While allies from the first game do return, Aloy's abrasiveness means you don't spend as much of the game with them as you'd like. It's especially frustrating as Varl – one of the most underutilised characters from the first game – is pushed aside by Aloy. Even though he ultimately adds a lot to the game, it feels like a lot of his character development happens off-screen as a result.

HERE WE GO AGAIN

Once unleashed into the wide open world you'll find everything is structured similarly to the first game. There's a checklist activities to keep you busy: Tallnecks to climb and scan the map, robot-creating Cauldrons to explore, outposts of enemies to kill.

Did Aloy get the worst Depop deal in the world, or is this person perhaps... someone else...?



READY TO RUMBLE

What to expect from DualSense support



1 SPEAKER

Whirrs, whacks, and twiggly pick-up noises come from here. It's like your hands are Aloy's.

2 HAPTICS

Detailed rumble effects give some texture to clambering as you scramble up and around.

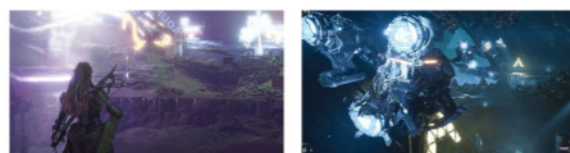
3 ADAPTIVE TRIGGERS

Slight resistance gives Aloy's bowstring pulls a bit of weight.





Carrie-Ann Moss' performance elevates the mysterious Zenith, though she's underutilised.



While the climbing controls enabling Aloy to scabble and leap around the world are now much more naturalistic than the very linear manoeuvring in the first game, it sometimes conflicts with how gorgeous *Forbidden West* is, awash with high-fidelity foliage and rocks everywhere you look. There's so much visual noise that it can be really hard to parse points of interaction. Some surfaces are fully climbable, some aren't. Prepare to hit the scan button a lot to have your Focus highlight what you can grab, or – better yet – select the option to have those highlights on all the time.

TOP: The late Lance Reddick returns as the morally grey Sylens, and continues to be one of the game's strongest performances.

ABOVE: Cauldrons are packed with platforming challenges. If only the jumping didn't feel so rigid.

JUMP AROUND

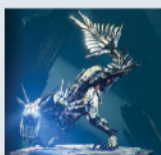
Even though it's an improvement on *Zero Dawn*, it still feels a step behind competitors like *Assassin's Creed*. Jumping puzzles are best approached with the knowledge that *Forbidden West* is looking for as little input from you as possible, ideally seeing you just lightly titling the stick and tapping jump only when you absolutely can't progress any further. Even then, Aloy's pathing can frequently get a little confused, sending her tumbling.

Much was made of the glider pre-release, but it adds very little to exploration, with its best function being to save you from fall damage. It's hard to get much distance with it given how quickly you descend, and a lot of the map simply doesn't make much use of it. Perhaps the result of



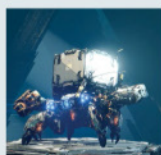
ROBOT WARS

Some of the 'chines you'll wallop



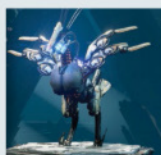
CLAWSTRIDER

Sometimes ridden by Regalla's rebels, their chainsaw mouths can send Aloy reeling.



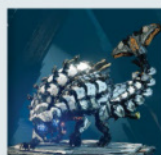
SHELL-WALKER

With tough defences, plop off their 'shell' to discover it's a cargo container full of goodies.



LONGLEG

Tip: dodge to the side, not back. With big jumps and bigger kicks, you'll get punted.



ROLLERBACK

Get your soup ready, because the rolls cometh – directly at you, at top speed.

the game being developed to support PS4 platforms, though an end-game unlockable flying mount suggests this isn't the case.

ROBO A ROBO

For all the jumping around and the open world, *Horizon* is a third-person shooter at heart, built around some wonderfully hand-crafted feeling weaponry. There's a real tactility to combat, especially when you fight the mechanical creatures.

Nightmarish, robotic takes on real-life animals and dinosaurs, these often huge foes are great fun to fight. Covered with discrete parts that you can tag and analyse, it almost feels like pinball as you ping them apart piece by piece. It's a rare area where the extra detail achievable with the game's tech really adds to the experience. Take aim with your bow at a beast's glowing sensors for massive damage, slowing down time while you aim; hurl a bomb at a huge sac of flammable material on their body for a deeply satisfying boom; throw down a trip caster in their path as they charge to throw them completely off balance; or use the ropecaster to tie them down to one spot and then use your spear to wail on them. It's a really satisfying system with far more tactical depth than you'd usually expect from this kind of blockbuster action game.

Even returning weapon types have been given fresh forms in *Forbidden*

West. Each mode of fire gets its own slot on the weapon wheel now, meaning your five pieces of gear can in practice feel like ten. Brand-new weapons are great additions, from the shredder gauntlet that hurls a spiked orb that rips off armour plating, to the spike thrower that hurls explosive javelins. Weapon techniques are bright spots in an otherwise dull upgrade tree, granting even more powerful mode of fire, like chewing through a whole clip of the rapid-fire boltcaster in one brutal burst or firing a spread of five arrows at once from your bow. The biggest robot dinos require you to use every trick in your arsenal, pushing your ammo to the

limit and forcing you to really take note of how they move and which weapons work best against their specific assortment of parts.

It's a shame, then, that so much of *Forbidden West* focuses on enemies

besides the series' iconic robosaurs. The smoother sci-fi elements introduced in the story give rise to some slick but utterly dull plastic robots and legions of annoying human guards. The best fight in the game is with a Slaughterspine, one of the game's new machines introduced late-game that's wonderfully huge and dangerous. The final boss fights, however, including those in the DLC, are just dudes with mech suits or futuristic armour, and they feel lacking in the series' distinctive flavour.

The best fight in the game is with a Slaughterspine

BURNING QUESTIONS

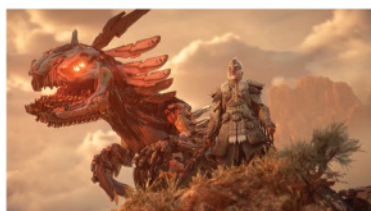
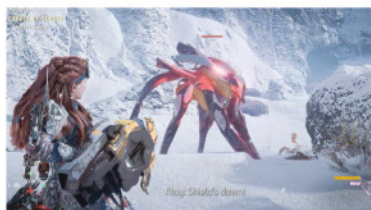
That expansion, *Burning Shores*, comes packaged in with this port at launch, and it remedies some of the base game's problems. Set in a Los Angeles devastated by tectonic plate drift, flooding has resulted in several tropical islands. That means lots of elevation to use your glider (plus geysers to throw you further into the air), and lots of water to swim around and explore, livening up the traversal. Even the narrative fares a bit better, thanks in part to Aloy finding a very likable new companion (and romance option), a bold seafarer named Seyka.

But unfortunately it's all rushed to fit into the smaller scope of an expansion. Aloy and Seyka's relationship is cute, but develops at a frantic pace; as does Aloy's relationship with the charismatic cult-leader-esque antagonist who, after they share one conversation, immediately kicks off the final boss fight. There's the frustrating feeling that *Burning Shores* is closer to what *Forbidden West* could have been were the studio able to more cleanly move forward. As it stands the machine combat ends up only a small part in a hugely boring world. Struggling to keep up with other, better open worlds, this sequel doesn't recapture the *Zero Dawn* magic, as desperately as it tries. ■

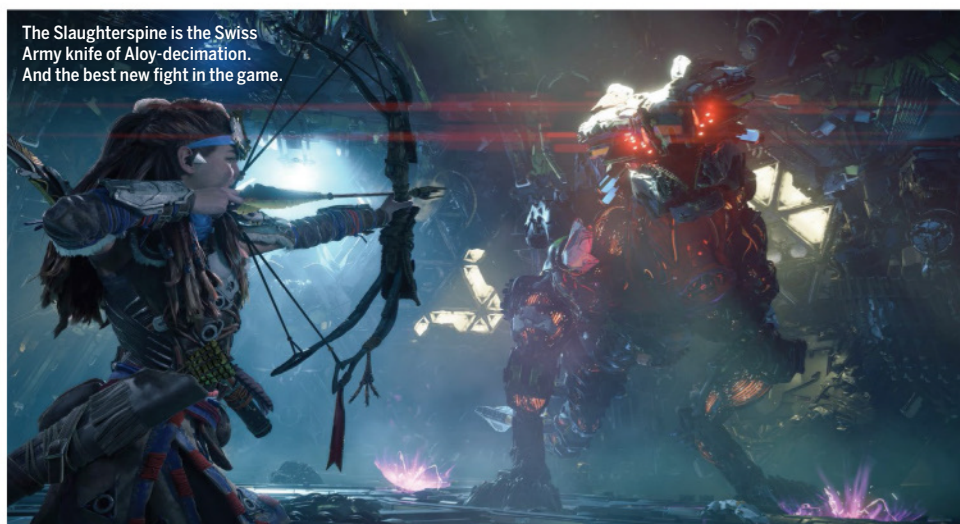
PC GAMER VERDICT

Technically superior but just not as fun as its predecessor, *Forbidden West* struggles to let go of its own past.

70



ABOVE: Regalla leads a rebel faction of Tenakth. A formidable antagonist, she's underserved – like most of *Forbidden West*'s characters.



The Slaughterspine is the Swiss Army knife of Aloy-decimation. And the best new fight in the game.



OFF PUTTING

Lee Carvalho's **PUTTING CHALLENGE 2**: another great Simpsons fan game

Putting Challenge 2 is (deep breath) a fan game based on the fake videogame featured in an episode of The Simpsons. Remember? Bart received it as a gift instead of the ultra-violent *Bonestorm*. While another developer has recreated the game featured in The Simpsons, here's Gumpy Function with a Game Boy 'sequel' containing very little actual golf content, instead exploring Lee Carvalho's life after the release of his licensed game.

As you might expect, this game is packed with Simpsons deep cuts, with almost every room in Carvalho's house containing an item bearing a reference to the show in its heyday. It's a very funny game, although the pixel art is particularly impressive, successfully mimicking the style of The Simpsons with only four shades of green and in a teeny resolution. It could easily pass for a licensed Simpsons Game Boy game.

It's a solid adventure game too, as you explore the house looking for Carvalho's golfing gear, combining items and overcoming obstacles in the traditional point and click manner. It is slightly fiddly, having to use the arrow keys to move the cursor rather than the mouse, but as

this is an actual Game Boy ROM, that's understandable.

At any time, you can click a button to spin the scene around and examine the other side of the environment, exploring the back half of, say, the living room or bedroom. You become quite familiar with Lee Carvalho's home, as you explore the house a couple of times, and as you take him to a professional tournament and signing session.

Takes an unexpected turn about halfway through

GREEN SCREEN

But *Putting Challenge 2* takes an unexpected turn about halfway through, and not by pivoting to horror, as is usually tediously the case. Little signs that something is not quite right build to an

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A Game Boy sequel to a fictional Simpsons golf game

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Gumpy Function

PUBLISHER
Gumpy Function

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, Nvidia
GeForce RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
bit.ly/LeeCarvalho2

understated and ultimately tactful reveal, one I'm going to have to spoil in order to give this a proper review.

It comes out that Lee is suffering from memory loss, and his golfing friend is worried about him. This is revealed in the second half of the game, as Lee once again looks for his treasured items, but can't remember where he usually keeps them, or the memories behind them. Lee has Alzheimer's, and as he is no longer able to look after himself, his friend arranges for him to go to a residential home. It's a quietly powerful ending to what begins as a joke-laden sequel to a fictional Simpsons game.

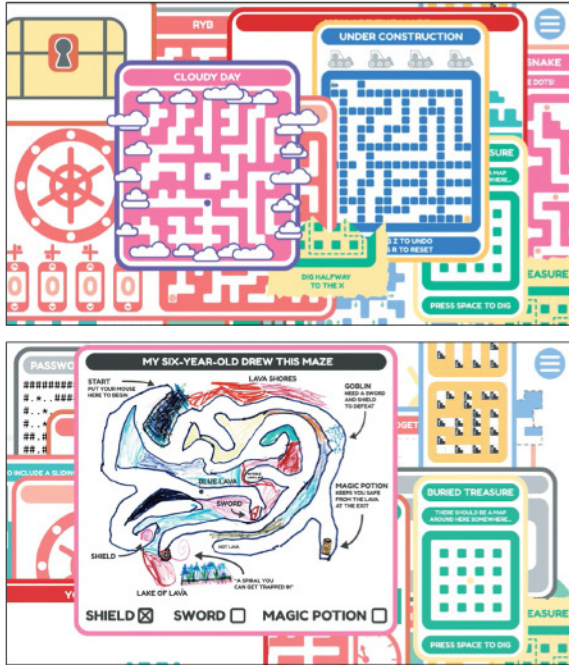
I did worry that the game might be using Alzheimer's as a cheap horror twist, but upon reflection I don't think that's the case. It's an affectionate look at an obscure Simpsons character and his little corner of the lore, made by a dev who has a history with the disease. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A surprisingly touching and tactful adventure game about a little-known Simpsons character.

78

BELOW: There are secrets hidden among the massive heap of mazes.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
FLEB

LINK
bit.ly/20Mazes

SHORT CIRCUITS

You know what you're in for with **20 SMALL MAZES**

This sure is a game made up of 20 small mazes, but of course there's a little more to it than that. I'm not sure if there's even one without a gimmick behind it, whether it's VVVVVV-style gravity flipping, teleporters, or walls you can smash down while driving a digger.

I spent a very enjoyable hour and a bit solving all the mazes, but it's the way they all link together that's truly impressive. The mazes are all laid atop one another, like windows on a horribly cluttered computer desktop, and to move between them you have to drag the others away from you.

It's satisfying on a tactile level, but the fact that the mazes are all in the same space also plays into the puzzles. There are clues buried in or behind the windows, items to collect and to drag around. For example, a

torn treasure map that reveals the location of a maze's exit, once it's been put back together.

It all seems daunting and overwhelming when you load up the game, as you're effectively being asked to solve 20 puzzles all at once. But that only makes it more rewarding as you chip away at this tangled mess of problems, with solved mazes dissolving into thin air.

And don't think it's just maze puzzles either, as one is also a *Sokoban* puzzle, another a test of dexterity. There's even one of those wretched sliding tile puzzles that adventure games insist on shoehorning in. That this puzzle is also a maze, set on the very tiles you're shifting around, speaks to the invention of a game that takes a straightforward premise and makes it anything but. ■

80

POMPING IRON

Solve problems with a hammer in **PSYCHOPOMP**

There's something oddly comforting about a world you explore on a fixed grid, methodically, as if you're filling in a crossword. There's no map to fill in, alas, in *Psychopomp*, but it's still a fascinating place to roam around in, square by square.

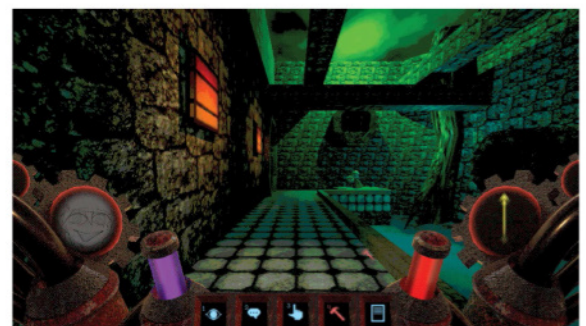
With its conspiracy-theory-spouting, potentially delusional protagonist, it's fair to say this is not your typical dungeon crawler, as the dungeons you're crawling around are nightmarish versions of real-life environments: a school, a factory and sewer network. Each is populated by peculiar NPCs, who chat cryptically and occasionally harbour vital switches or key items. However, this is not the sort of game where you can simply reason with them to hand the keycard over. Instead, you have to get your hammer out and, well, left-click.

There's a vein of edginess in *Psychopomp* that I'm not totally enamoured with, while the surreality of the setting, narrative and characters never quite coalesces into a legible story. But its strange imagery is incentive enough to explore.

Even though it's all set on a neat grid, this is a world where you'll sprain your neck from looking at all the architectural flourishes, the skyboxes and swirling fog.

As a dungeon crawler it's streamlined, with no character advancement and combat that boils down to hammering foes, then backing away. But these encounters earn their place. I wish that you could save the game mid-stage, as there was one section I had to replay multiple times. Still, what a bold, weird and dark take on the dungeon crawler genre. ■

BELOW: Plato is here, trapped in a TV screen in a gloomy school/prison.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
Free

DEVELOPER
Fading Club

LINK
bit.ly/Psychopomp

65

THEY'RE BACK

OLD GAMES REVISITED by Matthew Elliott



No, that's not confetti at the world's weirdest wedding: environments are semi-destructible.

ALMA MATER

Horror is a family affair in **FEAR**

First Encounter Assault Recon is an example of one my favourite videogame tropes: the laughably functional acronym. Instead of sounding cool, *FEAR* makes you imagine a team of dull military minds sat around a secret table in the Pentagon, trying to think of the perfect name for soldiers who shoot ghosts. Special Operations Occult Kill Initiative was almost certainly an option. Forget everything and remember.

It's one of many conceits which, upon return, make *FEAR* harder to take seriously. But this is largely unfair. It's deeply atmospheric, full of interactive environmental touches such as clanking cans, flapping birds, and flickering lights, which feel surprising even by modern standards. There's even an overhead projector which actually projects; something I'm apparently far more excited about than I should be. Sound design, too, does a brilliant job of setting the scene. It's hard to feel like a military badass when you're creeping around to the sound of throbbing background noises, sobbing babies and slamming doors. Mechanically, there's something crisp and visible about *FEAR*'s

systems. Read the current Steam reviews and almost all of them reference the nuance and reactivity of the enemy AI, usually while bemoaning how simplistic modern games are. There's some truth in this.

The cloned troopers you fight outflank you, lay down suppressing fire, work as a team, and even retreat when outgunned. It's a rare example of enemy units in games getting smarter when the difficulty is increased.

A rare example of enemy units in games getting smarter

FINE FETTEL

A thing that's aged less well in *FEAR* is the plot itself. It's not that it's bad; more that so many of its tropes have been leveraged in other, more deftly handled stories. The narrative involves private military contractors,

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
If *Ju-On: The Grudge* was a Robert Rodriguez movie

EXPECT TO PAY
£7.80

DEVELOPER
Monolith Productions, Inc., Timegate

PUBLISHER
Warner Bros Games

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700, 16 GB RAM, Nvidia GeForce GTX 1070

MULTIPLAYER
No (it did have it, but the servers are gone)

LINK
gog.com/game/fear_platinum

supernatural forces and secret research bases, which is all fine, but the execution is hammy. It doesn't help that the game's primary antagonist, a gore-soaked psychic called Paxton Fettel, sounds like he's named after a small English village. The eventual familial revelations don't land in a satisfying way but, truthfully, *FEAR* is really about the journey: the real story is the horrors we experienced along the way. Few people playing the game now would be shocked to learn that Fettel and player character Point Man are brothers, but the constant, creeping tension leaves far more of a mark. It's another classic horror trope in that everything would have been far more upsetting if a degree of ambiguity was maintained. It also features one of the single best jumpscare in all of horror gaming; the sort of environmental betrayal that will stop you from ever trusting a ladder again. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

A sharp mix of impeccable gunplay and scares, *FEAR* is more exciting now than it was at release.

83

BELOW: Those fairy lights really do bring an otherwise gloomy space to life.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£11

DEVELOPER
Kinetic Games

PUBLISHER
Kinetic Games

PHANTOM PAIN

The unseen side of the occult in **PHASMOPHOBIA**

TikTok would have us believe the idea of hunting ghosts and cryptids is wholesome fun. You gather your flask, checked shirt and antique camera, then sashay into abandoned spaces in search of the restless dead. *Phasmophobia* proves, as if it was even necessary, that listening to social media is usually a mistake.

The practical nature of *Phasmophobia* is part of what makes it so unsettling. If you were just wandering around cursed houses, bracing yourself for jumpscare, you'd probably become numb to its terrors. But everything here is underpinned by busywork. It feels like someone in middle management will be assessing your performance if you don't lay your quota of souls to rest. The slow-burn revelations help, too. It's important to gather all the evidence in order to

make an informed decision about a particular haunting, which adds an effective layer of additional stress. It's bad enough exploring a haunted house; worse still when you confuse shades with revenants and your fellow ghost hunters silently judge you for it. The fact you're usually working in a team changes the flavour of the game, too. You often split up and spread out, in the sort of way that makes you scream at the telly when people do it in horror movies. It's a more effective way of gathering evidence, of course, but it makes the experience unpleasant. Nothing makes you appreciate the solidarity of your colleagues quite like being left alone. And, despite what TikTok suggests, Converse and a ghost hunting badge are no defence against demons when you've misplaced your crucifix. ■

77

MAZE RUNNER

Taking revenge in **PAC-MAN CHAMPIONSHIP EDITION DX**

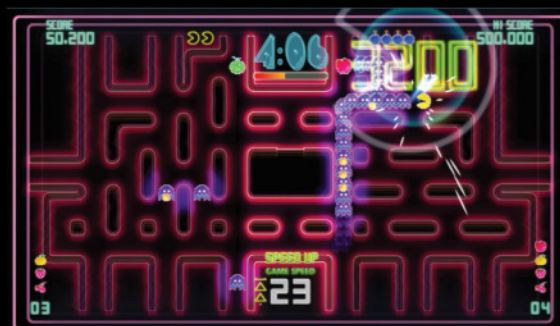
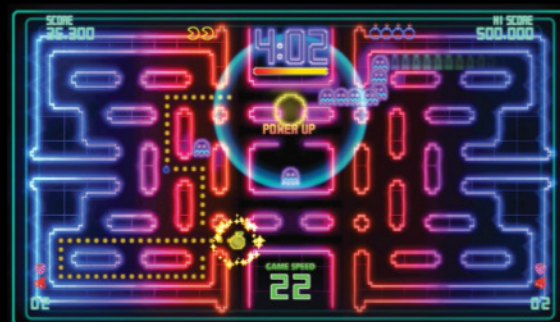
Rounding up this month's spectral collection is *Pac-Man Championship Edition DX*, if only because *Phasmophobia* has made me want to turn the tables on the undead for shaving actual years off my life. Does it hurt the ghosts when Pac-Man eats them? I hope so.

If nothing else, all this makes me feel better. And *Championship Edition DX* really is all about feel. It's easy to look at the luminous screenshots and assume this is nothing more than a neon upgrade of a beloved classic. But it's fast and endless and exhilarating, taking the grim inevitability of the original game away and replacing it with a perfect, dizzying loop of amphetamine enjoyment. It's even fun in the moments where you're the hunted, not the hunter – there are genuinely

few things in games that feel as wonderful as rounding a corner at exactly the right moment to avoid the deathly touch of a ghostly pursuer. And where the original game offered you a brief and tantalising taste of power via precious moments of invincibility that disappeared all too quickly, this version makes you feel like a lab-created apex predator, taking revenge on the scientists who created you. Chomping through a fat line of fleeing ghosts is like having a whole selection box to yourself. Somehow, every single enemy you munch is louder and better and more rewarding. It sounds like it should get repetitive: eat the dots, navigate the maze, wreak dark vengeance on your eternal enemies. But everything in this feels so incredible that time and space lose all meaning when you play. It's rather amazing really. ■

89

BELOW: Yes, it does look like the previous screenshot.



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
£8

DEVELOPER
Mine Loader Software Co

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

G.I. JOE WRATH OF COBRA

Yo Joe! Cobra returns once again with its most fiendish plot yet and it's up to G.I. JOE to defeat them once more! Pick one of the real American heroes, gear up, and get straight into the fight in this retro side-scrolling beat 'em up.



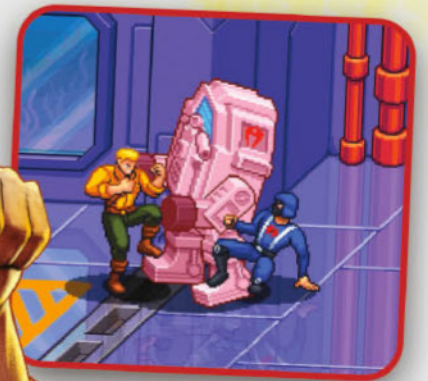
Coming to PC 2024.
Bringing a modern twist
to classic arcade music!
Wishlist Now on Steam.

 **Freedom Games®**



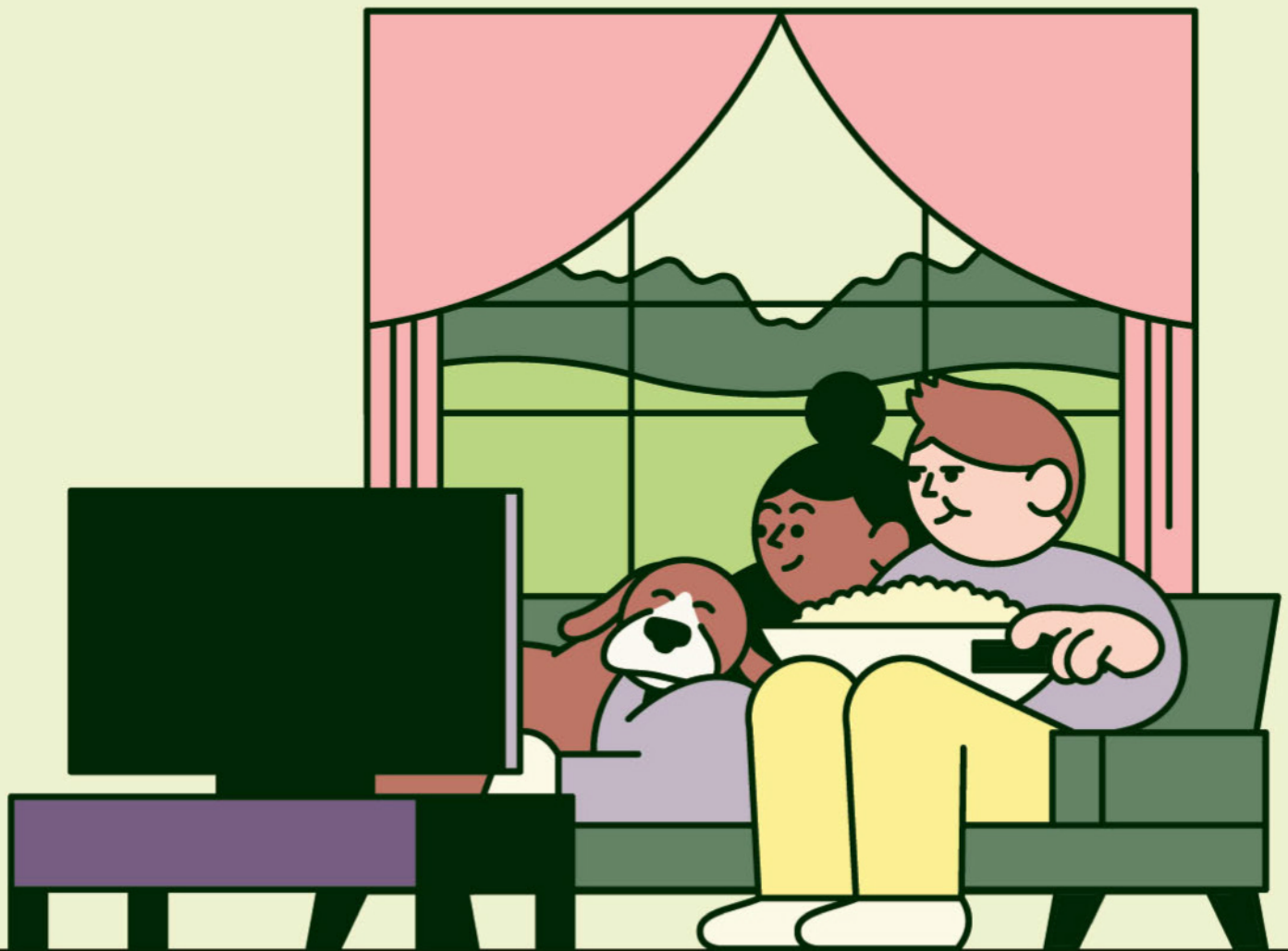


Cobra rears its ugly head and it's up to G.I. Joe to save the world! Embracing the 1980's era of the iconic universe, Wrath of Cobra features modern gameplay mechanics inspired by beat 'em-up classics.



SAVVY SAVERS, STEP THIS WAY.

Discover cover options for car, home and travel insurance, plus broadband and more.



GO.
COMPARE

Get more information and compare quotes at [Go.Compare](https://www.go.compare).

HARDWARE

GET THE PC YOUR GAMES DESERVE

94

GROUP TEST

Six top ergonomic keyboards tested to see which is best.

100

TECH REPORT

Is it worth upgrading your CPU right now? Phil Iwaniuk investigates.

102

TECH TALES

Does overclocking your GPU actually do anything any more?



104

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build a great gaming PC no matter your budget.

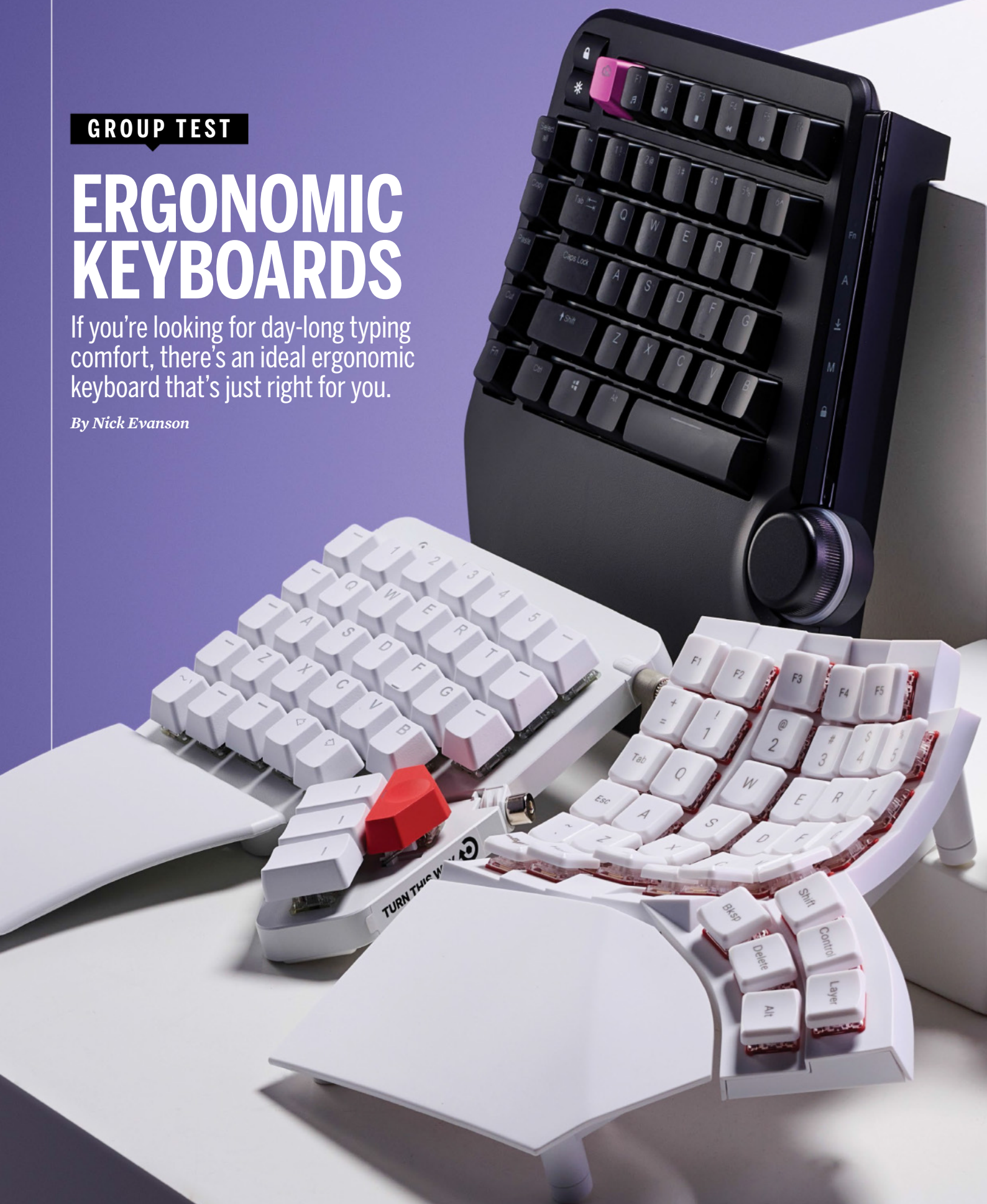


GROUP TEST

ERGONOMIC KEYBOARDS

If you're looking for day-long typing comfort, there's an ideal ergonomic keyboard that's just right for you.

By Nick Evanson

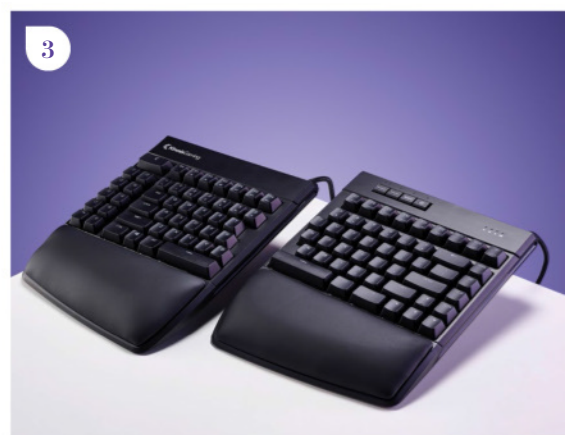
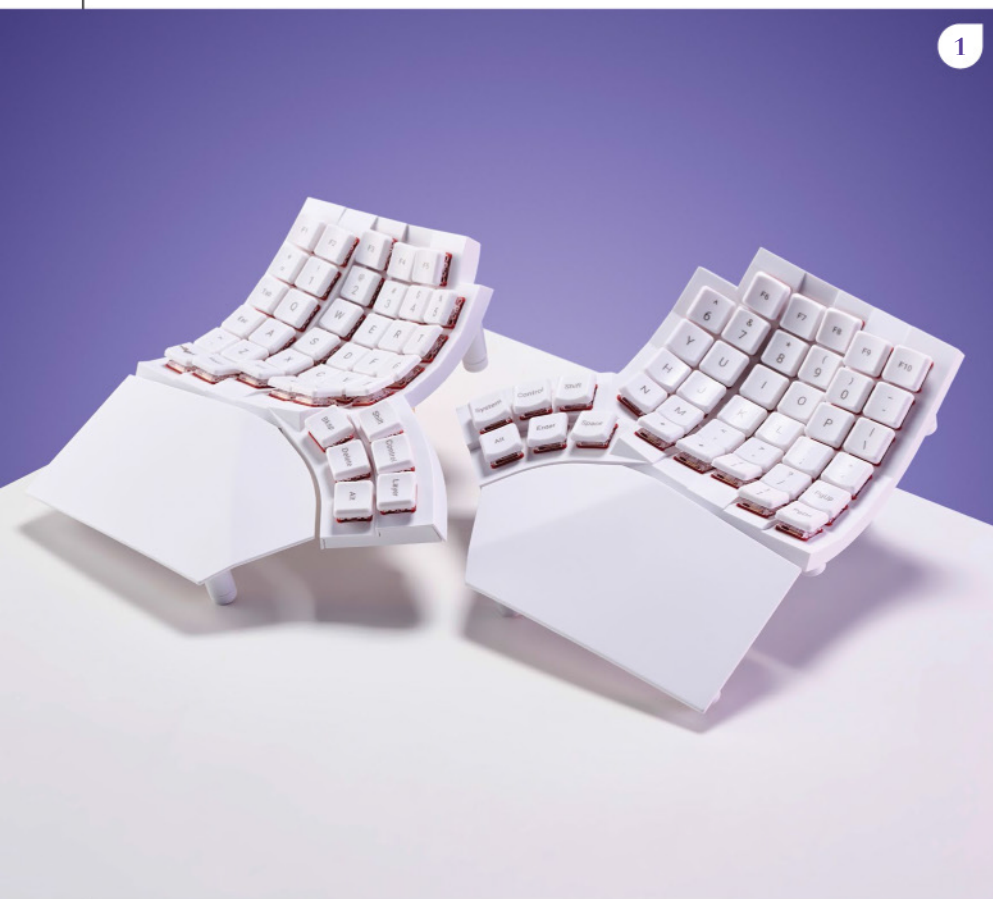


Standard keyboards just aren't great for your body. The key layout makes your fingers constantly stretch and splay, and forces your wrists to rotate inward. Your hands sit close together, so your shoulders don't get much chance to relax.

A quality ergonomic keyboard counters all of this and the best ones are designed to relieve the stresses you get from typing and gaming all day long. Picking the right one is no easy task and there's no such thing as a perfect choice, as everyone's needs are different.

What suits one person could well be an annoyance to someone else. There are some important things to watch out for, though, so avoid paying for a label and look for the right features. Here are six ergo keyboards to whet your appetite and help you decide whether it's time to take the plunge.





Glove80

MOERGO £320

Extreme ergo

1 It's the most outrageous-looking and expensive keyboard here, but the Glove80 is peerless when it comes to comfort and features. It's also the most complex and hardest to adapt to, thanks to the bowl-shaped layout. If you can remap your brain to it all, then you'll wonder just why you put up with a traditional keyboard for so long. Your hands, wrists, and shoulders will thank you on a daily basis. Every key can be reconfigured via software and the uniform keycaps mean you can move them all about, as you see fit. The same is true for tenting

and tilting, as many of the legs can be raised via a fiddly nut-and-bolt arrangement to get the perfect angle. The Glove80 demands commitment, not least because of the price tag. Everything about it has comfort at the heart of its design and that makes it very different from everything else you'll lay your hands on. It's the least gaming-friendly keyboard here, due to the thumb islands, but it's by far the most ergonomic.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Sublime comfort
- Ultra portable
- Very expensive

SPECS SWITCHES: MECHANICAL, THREE CHOICES OF KAILH CHOC / KEYS: 80 / CONNECTIVITY: WIRELESS OR WIRED, USB TYPE-C / SPLIT: FULLY SEPARATE / TENTING: CONTINUOUS / TILTING: CONTINUOUS

Moonlander

ZSA £290

Starship ergo

2 The highest levels of ergonomic comfort can be found with columnar keyboards, especially those that have thumb islands. This is where commonly used keys, such as Shift and Enter, are activated by your thumbs, reducing the amount of lateral movement your fingers need to go through.

ZSA's Moonlander is a stylish and feature-rich example of such a keyboard. Every key switch is hot-swappable and can be quickly remapped via software, and tenting is achieved through rotating metal legs and the islands. There's no tilting as such, but once tented the

keyboard does provide a small amount of positive tilt. Adapting to the layout is tough and it could take you a long time to get used to it. Those thumb islands also make gaming quite fiddly, forcing you to remap keys in most games, but with fewer keys on each island, it's not as awkward as on the Glove80. The Moonlander is very expensive but you're getting one of the most comfortable and low-stress keyboards money can buy.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Really comfortable
- Space-age looks
- High price

SPECS SWITCHES: MECHANICAL, CHERRY MX OR KAILH / KEYS: 72 / CONNECTIVITY: WIRED, USB TYPE-C / SPLIT: FULLY SEPARATE / TENTING: CONTINUOUS / TILTING: NONE

THE MECHANICAL SWITCHES OFFER LOTS OF FEEDBACK



GROUP TEST

Freestyle Edge

KINESIS GAMING £230

Everyone's ergo

3 If you want a great keyboard that offers superb ergonomics, for all day typing, and still be great for gaming, then look no further. The fully split arrangement is permanently wired together but there's more than enough cable length to get things just right for you.

Despite all the features, the Freestyle Edge is compact and sleek, with detachable wrist pads. Though it lacks a number pad, it has plenty of keys, eight of which can be easily programmed for macros, across multiple profiles.

Out of the box, there's no support for tenting and tilting,

but an optional lift kit gives you three levels of tenting and a fixed but small amount of positive tilt. Given how expensive the keyboard is, the fact that you have to pay out even more just to get some tenting is a bit cheeky.

It's a serious amount of money for a keyboard, but equipped with the lift kit, the Freestyle Edge is a perfect blend of ergonomic and gaming features. It's a bar from which to judge the rest.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Great all-rounder
- Ideal for small hands
- Tenting is an extra cost

SPECS SWITCHES: MECHANICAL, 4 CHOICES OF CHERRY MX / KEYS: 95 / CONNECTIVITY: WIRED, USB TYPE-A / SPLIT: FULL SEPARATE / TENTING: NONE, OPTIONAL KIT / TILTING: NONE, OPTIONAL KIT

C959 ErgoTKL

CLOUD NINE £200

Gamers' ergo

4 The C959 ErgoTKL is big, bold, and very ergonomic, provided your hands are the right size. The separate keyboard halves are connected via a proprietary cable that's long enough to suit most arrangements. And while the amount of tenting is fixed, the angle is a good all-round position. The mechanical switches offer lots of feedback and you can have as much click as you like, depending on which set you choose to purchase. There are four keys to program macros for and there's a handy control wheel for media and other functions, though its

backlight is permanently on and very bright.

Tilting is restricted to negative values to cater for standing desk users, but the keyboard has a natural positive tilt due to the shape of the chassis. The overall ergonomics of the C959 are very good and if you're the right size for it, you can easily type all day and game all night. But you're going to have to pay a pretty penny for all that comfort.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Day-long comfort
- Great for big hands
- Constant wheel light

SPECS SWITCHES: MECHANICAL, THREE CHOICES OF KAILH / KEYS: 89 / CONNECTIVITY: WIRED, USB TYPE-A / SPLIT: FULLY SEPARATE / TENTING: FIXED 7 DEG / TILTING: -4 OR -7 DEG



**SWOOPING CURVES
ARE MORE THAN JUST
A NICE AESTHETIC**

6

ERGO FEATURES THAT MATTER THE MOST

Tenting

Your wrists naturally rotate outward when resting your hands on a keyboard. Raising the middle so it forms a tent shape ensures your wrists are as relaxed as possible.

Split

Normal keyboards force your shoulders to rotate inward. Separating the keys lets them sit naturally. Fully split keyboards, where you can position the halves anywhere you like, are the most flexible of all.

Tilting

Your wrists should ideally rest flat, with respect to your forearms. Depending on how you're sitting and standing, you may want to tilt the keyboard.

Columnar

Standard layouts cause your fingers to splay while typing. A columnar arrangement has the keys in columns, meaning your fingers only need to move back and forth, easing the stress on them.



Ergo K860

LOGITECH **£110**

Office-based ergo

5 Logitech's premier ergonomic keyboard is the classic K860 and it's probably the ideal starting point, if you're considering how best to start supporting your body's needs. The keys are permanently split, though the separation could do with being a tad wider if you have broad shoulders. The level of tenting is greater than that of the Wave Keys and should suit most people, being around seven degrees or so. Swooping curves are more than just a nice aesthetic: they make the keyboard very comfortable to use. There's no option to apply a

positive tilt, only two stages of a negative angle. Great for standing, but less so for sitting. Fortunately, the typing experience is very pleasant and although the key feedback is muted, it's enough to enjoy a spot of gaming.

However, the high wrist rest might limit just how long that session is, especially if you tend to sit quite low in relation to the keyboard. Office work is where the K860 truly excels.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Good ergonomics
- Super quiet in use
- Not much feedback

SPECS SWITCHES: MEMBRANE / KEYS: 110 / CONNECTIVITY: WIRELESS / SPLIT: FIXED / TENTING: FIXED / TILTING: -4 OR -7 DEG

Wave Keys

LOGITECH **£70**

Entry-level ergo

6 Most ergonomic keyboards are pretty expensive but not Logitech's Wave Keys, though it's not exactly a budget-level product. While the design won't be to everyone's taste, there's a full set of keys here and three wireless connection profiles, letting you use it on multiple devices. With only a modicum of tenting, your wrists are given the slightest of relief and for most users, it's not enough to be really effective. The key layout isn't split in any way and while the compact format is handy if you're short on desk space, it won't do your shoulders any

favours over long periods. What may really put you off your office work and gaming is the serious lack of key feedback. It's great for being silent, but the rubbery feeling never lets you know if you're pressing too hard or too lightly. At least the wrist rest is comfortable and supportive. It's not too pricey and could be worth a look if you just want to dabble a toe, or more rather a finger, into the ocean of ergonomics.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Compact and cute-ish
- Awful key feedback
- Not all that much ergo

SPECS SWITCHES: MEMBRANE / KEYS: 100 / CONNECTIVITY: WIRELESS / SPLIT: NONE / TENTING: FIXED / TILTING: +4 DEG



If you opted for a budget chip with your last motherboard, upgrading is a wise move.

DIE ANOTHER DAY

Why it's probably not worth upgrading your CPU yet

PC gaming isn't governed by universal logic. We build a new PC to meet *Ark: Survival Evolved's* demands, and then spend a hundred hours playing *Vampire Survivors* on it instead. We wear RGB headsets and then sit there, not seeing the RGB lighting. And we pressure ourselves to buy a new GPU every 17 minutes while other elements of our gaming setup like the monitor we took from work in 2012 soldier on.

All of which is to say, there are no hard and fast rules when it comes to upgrading. Usually it takes a new game's arrival and subsequent refusal to run faster than flipbook speed to prompt some new componentry. But such a haphazard approach doesn't sit well with all of us. And when it comes to the big kahuna of upgrades, the CPU, it's especially tricky to create a sensible rule.

Buying a new CPU is the most significant upgrade project we put ourselves through, but it's rarely the most impactful. And that all comes down to hardware compatibility. If you buy a new CPU chip that's compatible with your motherboard's existing chipset, chances are that new square of silicon won't offer much in the way of extra performance, because CPU manufacturers and motherboard designers are in league to bleed us all dry and force us to buy an entirely new system whenever we fancy a new processor.

They'll probably tell you it's more about evolving motherboard architecture to get all your components talking to each other smartly and more efficiently, and devising new CPU architectures that simply won't work on anything but the latest chipset. Whatever the truth (it's the latter, put the tinfoil hat away) it's an expensive proposition to upgrade your CPU, because you probably need a new mobo and RAM to go with it.

BEST INTEL CHIP

The best Intel chip you could slam into a system right now is the i9-14900K. It'll set you back more than £500, but it'll give you 24 cores going like the clappers at 6GHz in Turbo mode. To use it, you'll need a motherboard with an Intel 600 or 700 Series chipset, both of which released in November 2021 to mark the start of the Alder Lake and Raptor Lake era.

So if you already have an Alder Lake or Raptor Lake system, chances are you popped a Core i9-12900KF into it when you built it. It cost about the same as the 14900K at launch in November 2021 (about £550) and it's been giving you 16 cores and 24 threads running at 5.1GHz in Turbo mode until this point. Upgrading to the newer chip for that £500+ outlay might get you 10-20% more in-game performance. It's cheaper than buying a new high-end GPU, but considering this is the cost-effective version of upgrading since you're leaving the rest of your system intact, it's not a massive gain.



Old gold

How often do gamers actually invest in new gubbins? While the four-year rule's banded around, Steam's hardware survey suggests the average player works to a much slower cadence. Five percent of the platform's users are sticking with a dual-core CPU setup and a fifth use quad-core CPUs. Nvidia's GeForce GTX 1650 is the second-most popular GPU with 4% of users loyally sticking by the 2019 card, and pre-RTX 10-series cards make up three of the top 10 GPUs. Take a breather – your system's not falling behind.



FAR LEFT: Monitors look like this now. It's time.

LEFT: AMD's promises about socket lifespans should make Ryzen a more shrewd investment.

CRISIS CORE *Four major world events since your last CPU purchase, probably*



CHATGPT

We use AI to do life now. Write a paper, plan a date, draw somebody with six fingers, the lot.



LOADS OF NEW PMs

Since you started reading this, a new one entered Downing Street. There's no point learning their names any more.



WAR, EVERYWHERE

Reading the news is like following the end of turn report in a game of *Civilization* now. Pretty grim.



LOCKDOWN ENDED

The world adjusted to a 'new normal', then grew to find that phrase repellent and went back to the old normal.

Of course, the whole proposition changes if you opted for a cheaper CPU when you first built the system. The wallet-friendly Core i5-12600KF retailed for under £300, and upgrading from that model to the new i9 wunderkind is likely to almost double your framerates in many games. The only applicable lesson here, then? If you scrimped on CPU spend when you bought your latest system, going big on a new chip within as little as three years might be a better option than a new graphics card.

MATHEMATICS

How do the mathematics add up over in the red side of the divide? The Ryzen 9 7950X3D is AMD's all-out performance chip, and just over a year after launch you can get it for about £50 less than its £599 MSRP. To use it you'll need a socket AM5 motherboard. That platform's been around since 2022, and the 7950X3D has been the go-to performance chip on that platform since early 2023. Previously, the cheaper Ryzen 7 5800X3D (retailing for £319 when it launched in November 2022) was the sweet spot CPU. So just for fun, let's compare them and imagine upgrading from 2022 to 2024's smartest AMD CPU pick. Dropping that extra £550 while leaving the rest of the system untouched in this case might net you an extra

BUYING A NEW CPU IS THE MOST SIGNIFICANT UPGRADE PROJECT

10-15% FPS performance in most games, so sayeth the benchmarks. In a way, that's only putting a tourniquet on the wound. Because if you spend twice during one chipset generation, you're investing in tech that has a short lifespan and that's about to be usurped within a year or two. In the above examples, that means dropping £800+ in the space of four years on CPUs alone, and having to leave both of them behind when the time comes to invest in a

motherboard featuring a new chipset.

It's probably a better rule of thumb to skip a chipset generation instead. Buying into CPUs, mobos and RAM every other generation means you'll notice the benefits much more significantly, and gives you the time to squirrel away for quality componentry when you do take the plunge. If money's but a trifle to you, then of course the best time to upgrade

is right this instant – there's always a higher performance piece of silicon you can plug into your system somewhere. But if you're trying to be cost-effective, take a leaf out of Intel's philosophy book and adopt the tick-tock cadence. While the computing giant used to use the adage to refer to its policy of revolutionary chips and then refinements, it's equally descriptive for 'buy one, skip one'. ■

Phil Iwanik

CLOCKING OFF

Does overclocking your GPU actually do anything any more?

Friends, the worst fate has befallen me: my GPU's getting a bit old. Not so much that certain new releases are off limits, you understand. That used to be the case in a bygone era of PC gaming when advancements moved quicker. Minimum requirements were to be agonised over, parents pleaded with, witnessing the cool new game on even the lowest settings a triumph. No, what I mean is there are now some games I have to use the 'performance' DLSS mode with. I know. I'm really sad about it.

Because it only feels like five minutes ago that my RTX 2080 TI – Founders Edition, mind you – stood atop the GPU pile, metaphorical legs splayed wide in a power pose favoured by Beyoncé or, less convincingly, right-wing politicians. For a moment back then it was the best card you could chuck in a PC. And now it's subjecting me to very marginally blurrier DLSS. And sometimes, I notice the frame rate slip below 50 in *Alan Wake II*. The worst part: Nvidia doesn't even give me DLSS 3's cool frame generation tech, which would alleviate the issue of running an older card. Wonder why they did that, eh?

You know this pain too. And pain is the word, not mere hyperbole, given that Nvidia's top consumer GPU costs the best part of two thousand pounds sterling, also known as 'five entire PS5s'. The sensation of nearing GPU upgrade time is now akin to taking your car in for an MOT with a deep suspicion that it needs an entirely new engine, or hearing worryingly terminal noises coming from your boiler.

But what if there was a solution that didn't involve shelling out close to the UK average monthly take-home salary to get slightly better frame rates? Time was, you could turn to clock settings to squeeze a bit more out of your components and win a few extra frames that way. Overclocking has fallen out of favour in recent years,

though. Ironically in an era in which many of us have liquid-cooled PCs and cases with incredible airflow, we tend not to bother messing with stock values in our BIOS.

A few factors contributed to that, including power-efficient designs on chips that in effect 'overclocked' themselves under high load, and most significantly an industry clampdown on getting free performance. You didn't need to buy the 'K' variant of a CPU to unlock the overclocking features, once upon a time.

But while CPU and RAM overclocking's always been a

bit of a dark art involving unfriendly BIOS menus and over-volting, graphics cards have traditionally been easier to tweak. And that's still true today – third-party GPU manufacturers EVGA, Asus and MSI all offer overclocking tools for you to run in Windows and change values in real time.

The best of the bunch is still old reliable MSI Afterburner. It's got a small install footprint, a simple UI and easy profile saving. But crucially, does it actually let me get more performance out of my veteran card? I reinstalled *Cyberpunk 2077: Phantom Liberty* and intended to find out.

THE BEST OF THE BUNCH IS STILL OLD RELIABLE MSI AFTERBURNER

NIGHT CITY

First stop, of course, was Reddit. Why bother to ramp up your base clock and memory clock frequencies in nice, safe increments and test each setting in a benchmark when you can just paste in someone else's values and hope for the best? Consensus online was that most users were able to hit was 100-200Mhz to the core and up to 500Mhz to the memory. I started with a 'conservative' 100Mhz and 400Mhz respectively, took a trip to Night City and observed the results.

Incidentally, is anyone selling a 4090? As suspected, my GPU could hold those values and remain stable, and as a nice bonus it didn't even sound like an Airbus A380 was idling in my office. But the benefit to performance?



PHIL IWANIUK
Former PC Format staffer Phil Iwaniuk used to cook the team a full English each morning on the white-hot surface of his office GPU. Apparently thermal paste sets off a fried mushroom beautifully.

STANDING ORDER *Four overclocking apps that won't fry your GPU*



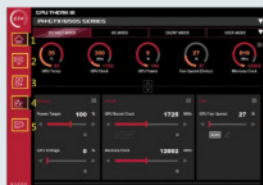
MSI AFTERBURNER

Designed by MSI, obviously, but it works with cards by other companies too. Clear, simple and easy to save your profiles on.



EVGA PRECISION

Similar interface to Afterburner, but a bit simpler. The downside being that you get fewer monitoring options.



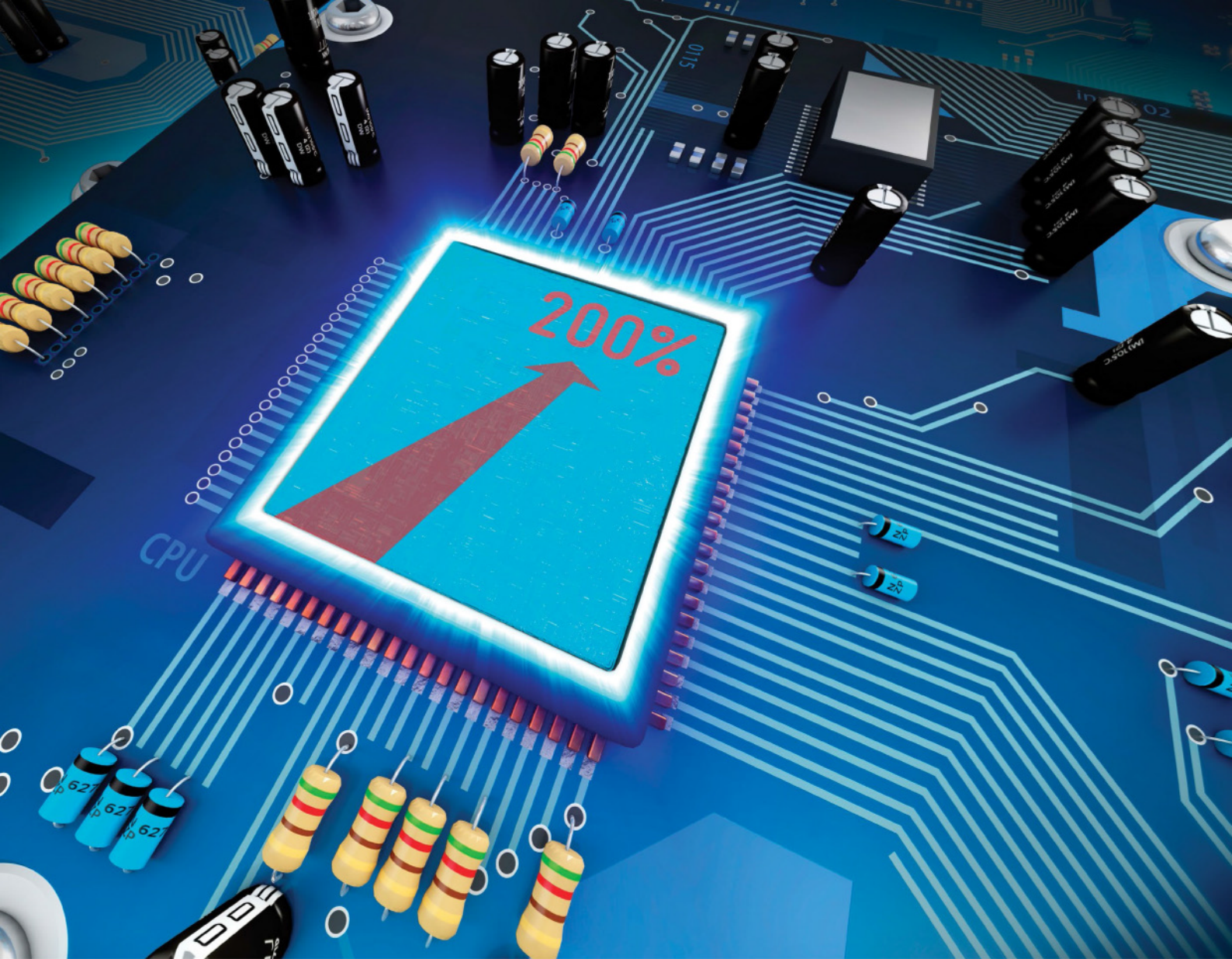
ASUS GPU TWEAK III

Like all the rest, it supports all cards, not just Asus-branded models. Some nice mode presets and plenty to tweak.



SAPPHIRE TRIXX

Old as the hills, but constantly updated and still works a charm on modern RTX cards. Also handles some visual customisation.



Negligible. Based on *Cyberpunk*'s benchmark, even when I dared to overclock to 130MHz core and 500MHz memory, the FPS kickback was only 3-4 extra frames at 1600p, max graphics settings and DLSS on quality mode.

And that makes sense. Where once GPU manufacturers set their clock speeds extremely cautiously, thinking of the card's entire lifespan, modern designers push the silicon about as hard as it can go in boost mode, and let the card's load dictate when that boost mode kicks in. Cards have been auto-overclocking ever-more intelligently for a decade now, and unless you're willing to run your system submerged in liquid nitrogen you're not going to get substantial gains by tweaking the numbers. It's a lot more user-friendly, and paired with AI-assisted performance enhancement it makes for easier gaming. Just as long as you're not ringfenced out of the new software features games depend on to hit playable frame rates, like DLSS 3's frame generation. Now, back to setting up those eBay alerts...

Phil Iwaniuk

ABOVE: Gone are the days when we could get meaningful boosts through BIOS tweaks.

BELOW: One day it'll be playable. Probably. Until then: DLSS.



YOUR NEXT PC

BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick these parts if you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build

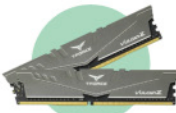
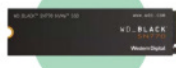
You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
£1,044

MOTHERBOARD		B660M Pro RS ASRock £112 This is as cheap as we want to go while still offering room for expansion and upgrades down the line.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £190 Intel's added four more cores to its entry-level Core i5 and it's become even more fantastic value.
GRAPHICS CARD		Radeon RX 7600 AMD £255 You could spend a bit more on an RTX 4060, but for a genuinely budget machine we're siding with AMD.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free There's room for an upgrade here, but on a budget the included CPU cooler will work just fine.
MEMORY		T-Force Vulkan Z 16GB Teamgroup £36 Goodbye 8GB, hello 16GB of speedy DDR4-3200.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 550W Be Quiet! £95 We have to run a 550W PSU for the Radeon RX 7600, as per AMD's recommendations.
SSD		WD Black SN770 500GB Western Digital £41 It's finally time to ditch SATA and go for an NVMe drive even in a budget machine such as this.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash (we don't budget it), but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Zauron Aerocool £32 This Aerocool will let your components breathe and has space for further expansion and cooling.
DISPLAY		Mobiuz EX240 BenQ £132 You can get an excellent gaming monitor for not a huge sum of cash nowadays, and this BenQ is our favourite on a budget.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £49 It's actually mind blowing what you can pick up for this little cash: A hot-swappable mechanical board that looks lovely.
MOUSE		G203 Logitech £24 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips.
HEADSET		HS55 Stereo Corsair £40 Corsair's budget cans are comfy and have a surprisingly excellent microphone for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
£1,601

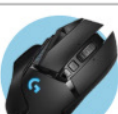
MOTHERBOARD		B660M Mortar WiFi MSI £177 This MSI board delivers everything we need in a compact package and allows us to use much cheaper DDR4 memory.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 13400F Intel £199 Yes, this is the same CPU as the budget build. It's simply too good value to miss and perfect for high fps gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		RX 7700 XT AMD £440 If you can spare the extra cash, the RX 7800 XT is a tantalising upgrade. Nevertheless, we'll opt for AMD's cheaper card.
COOLER		Laminar RM1 (included with CPU) Intel Free Intel bundles a redesigned CPU cooler with some 13th Gen processors. This little chip chiller will serve us well for a while
MEMORY		Vengeance LPX 16GB DDR4-3200 Corsair £36 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		Pure Power 12 M 650W Be Quiet! £107 This larger Be Quiet! PSU offers a stable platform with modern PCIe 5.0 connectivity.
SSD		WD Black SN770 1TB Western Digital £63 There are faster PCIe 4.0 drives, but this is the best value for money SSD around.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital £38 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary or in the costing, but it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		H7 NZXT £100 It's very clever of NZXT to design such an easy PC case to build into, and make it look so gorgeous too.
DISPLAY		S2722DGM Dell £260 With a snappy 165Hz refresh rate and a 1440p resolution, this Dell is an enviable blend of monitor performance.
KEYBOARD		KM250 RGB G.Skill £49 You could spend more for a full-size gaming keyboard, but this G.Skill will certainly suffice for most gamers.
MOUSE		DeathAdder V2 Razer £47 Tried and tested, this Razer mouse is a superb companion for competitive gaming without breaking the bank.
HEADSET		Cloud Alpha HyperX £85 We're still not over the awesome audio quality and excellent comfort of the HyperX Cloud Alpha.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
£5,349

MOTHERBOARD		MEG X670E Ace MSI £715 There are cheaper X670 boards than this, but we're going extreme and this is one of the most fully featured around.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 9 7950X3D AMD £550 AMD's 3D stacked chips are awesome for gaming, thanks to heaps of cache. This Ryzen 9 is the best of the bunch.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 4090 Nvidia £1,764 The RTX 4090 is immense, in every way. The performance it offers is unmatched by any GPU out there.
COOLER		Kraken X63 NZXT £155 One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump, though you'll have to request an AM5 bracket for AMD compatibility.
MEMORY		Trident Z5 RGB (2x16GB) G.Skill £118 This is a new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. DDR5 is blisteringly and fantastically quick.
POWER SUPPLY		Prime TX-1000 Seasonic £340 An ATX 3.0 PSU would also be good here, but we've tested this Seasonic and know it's worthy of such a build.
BOOT DRIVE		WD Black SN850X 2TB Western Digital £110 You could drop in a PCIe 5.0 SSD into this build, but it's even too overkill for us right now. The SN850X is a superb PCIe 4.0 drive.
DATA DRIVE		NM790 4TB Lexar £189 With 4TB of storage, it's going to take one seriously big Steam library to get anywhere close to filling this drive up.
CASE		5000D Corsair £140 We swear this stylish mid-tower is bigger on the inside. It's the PC equivalent of the TARDIS.
DISPLAY		34 QD-OLED (AW3423DWF) Alienware £740 You could be much more sensible on your screen than this. For this build, however, we only want the best.
KEYBOARD		ROG Azoth Asus £250 This keyboard's secret? Lubed switches. Don't knock it until you've tried it. It's also wireless and very well made.
MOUSE		G502 Lightspeed Logitech £120 With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.
HEADSET		Arctis 7 Wireless SteelSeries £158 If you've settled on a wireless keyboard and mouse, the last thing you want is a pesky cable to your headset.

EXTRA+ LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



The loathsome Dung Eater.

“You have to look past the fact that he uses a spine as a sword”

ELDEN RING's worst character is part of my Tarnished dream team

I always seem to be actively trying to resist another *Elden Ring* playthrough. I only have to hear someone mention the game, even in passing, and I'm already eying it up in my Steam library where it sits, eternally installed and waiting for my resolve to crumble. Of course, that's exactly what happened when I watched the recent *Shadow of the Erdtree* DLC trailer – so back to the Lands Between I went.

Despite the number of hours I've racked up in the game over the last two years, I still haven't done everything. It's certainly impossible to get everything done in one playthrough and there are certain choices you'll get different outcomes for, and one of those happens to involve the most repugnant character

SARAH JAMES



THIS MONTH
Rushed to Leyndell in record time to free my “friend”.

ALSO PLAYED
Nightingale,
Last Epoch

I think I've come across in any FromSoft game.

Let's be clear: Dung Eater isn't a nice person, and I killed him during my first *Elden Ring* playthrough without feeling bad about it at all. He gives off an unmistakable vibe of someone you really don't want to mess with from the moment you meet him, and it only gets worse as his questline progresses. He's certainly not someone you'd want to spend any length of time with, let alone drag around the Lands Between, defeating enemies and any

TOP: Yep, he's definitely loathsome.

manner of boss you might come across. Yet, that's exactly what I found myself doing. And what's worse, I've somehow become pretty fond of the guy.

GOOD OMENS

If you didn't know, you can get Dung Eater as a spirit ash and summon him to help you in fights, just as you can the wolves that Ranni gifts you at the start of the game. Certain choices made during some early quests allow you to administer a potion that turns him into a summon, so you can call on him to help you wherever you're able to use spirit ashes.

HE'S NOT SOMEONE YOU'D WANT TO SPEND ANY LENGTH OF TIME WITH



While I know there are other – probably technically better – summons out there, Dung Eater absolutely holds his own in a scrap, especially if you’re a caster and want someone to distract enemies or bosses while you hurl magic at them. I mean, sure, he’s not as agile as Tiche or as versatile as the Mimic Tear, but he’s got his own kind of charm. He has some spells up his sleeve too, throwing out curses and draining the health of most things he touches at an alarming rate.

I love the way he returns to you once he’s dispatched any perceived threats to your person, and continues to patrol by your side like some kind of gruesome guardian. Of course, you have to look past the fact that he uses a spine as a sword and would do unspeakable things to the corpses he makes, but as far as Tarnished dream-teams go, he’s my top pick.

I doubt we’ll get answers to the origins of Dung Eater in the DLC, but if you’re starting a new playthrough and are looking for an excuse to show him some mercy, you could do a lot worse than take Dung Eater along for the ride. Well, actually, you couldn’t, but if you can put your morals aside for a while, he’s pretty good in a fight. ■



“The world is ending in a matter of days”

Being a sword in **FFXIII: LIGHTNING RETURNS**

▶ ROBERT JONES



THIS MONTH
Saved the souls of humanity.
You’re welcome, guys.

ALSO PLAYED
Outcast – A New Beginning,
RoboCop: Rogue City

The world is ending in a matter of days. Doom is upon Nova Chrysalia, the corrupted, dying world created when the world of Gran Pulse and the limbo realm of Valhalla, a plane that exists between life and death, collapsed together. Chaos surrounds this last bastion of humanity against the endless nothingness of non-existence, and when the doomsday clock hits zero, the apocalypse shall arrive.

On the edge of apocalypse, Lightning, a hero from the past, returns. Awoken by the god Bhunivelze to save as many of the remnants of humanity’s souls as she can to be reborn into a new world, Lightning must race against time itself to not only save as many people as she can, an act that she has been promised will see her reunited with her deceased sister Serah, but also herself, which is wracked with guilt and sorrow.

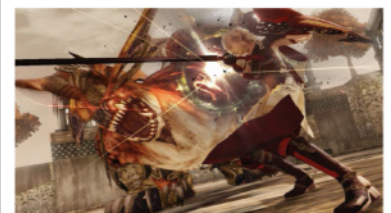
So opens the closing act in the *Final Fantasy XIII* trilogy of games and, for me, one of the most epic but nuanced storylines gaming has delivered. Lightning is a flawed saviour, operating in a flawed world,

one ruled by flawed gods, but despite her personal demons she must fight on to the bitter end, making choices that will save some but doom others, in a world that she herself has helped bring to its final days.

MATURE AND COMPLEX

Final Fantasy XIII: Lightning Returns is a complex game, and one that I would argue is very much made for older gamers. It’s not just the tone the game radiates, which is melancholic, nor the themes, which centre around vulnerability, duty and sacrifice, which lead to this mature, complex experience, but also the game’s very systems itself, from its oppressive doomsday clock mechanic (Lightning has a maximum of 14 in-game days to complete all five main quests or its game over), to its actually scarily deep and hard to master combat system.

I’d go as far to say that playing *Lightning Returns* for the first time is actually daunting. But like all truly great pieces of art, if you persevere and sacrifice (like Lightning herself must) the time needed to understand just how this world works, then the resultant experience is truly unforgettable. ■



“If you’re going to carpet a salon, the walls are the best place for it”

Checked to see if I’d be a good barber in **HAIRDRESSER SIMULATOR**

Ever feel like you’d be really good at something, despite refusing to try it? I feel that way about dessert making. I see a great confection and think, ‘I could make that.’ In my heart I know I couldn’t, but there are lots of men who think they’d win a fight with a bear, so I could be more delusional.

One thing I don’t feel that way about is hairdressing. I’m not even good at shaving my own head, and have been known to leave my apartment with a little patch of hair I missed behind one ear. I also don’t like touching other people’s hair. I can’t help but picture its future life as a slimy ball clogging a sink somewhere.

I do have an interest in haircuts, though – perhaps a symptom of being bald – so I wondered if maybe hair styling is the opposite of baking for me: something I think I’d be bad at that I’d be good at. Videogames are one way to test assumptions about ourselves, so I picked up a new game, *Hairdresser Simulator*, to test the theory. The answer is no, I would not be a good barber.

▶ **TYLER WILDE**



THIS MONTH
Was not a good barber.

ALSO PLAYED
Helldivers 2, Balatro

CLEAN AND CUT

I should also say that *Hairdresser Simulator* is not a great game. Most of the hairdressing activities are achieved by moving the mouse in a downward trajectory, or over an area of scalp: rinsing, shampooing, brushing, dying, straightening. I guess that’s true of the actual activities, but as much as I appreciate mundanity in games, there’s a limit.

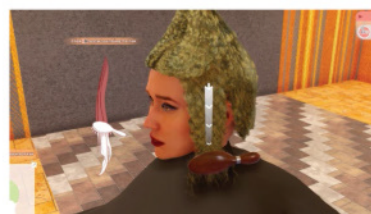
One thing I can’t say about *Hairdresser Simulator* is that it isn’t thorough. Before you get to all that dyeing and straightening, you’ve got to buy a dingy starter salon, repair its

cracked walls with plaster, clean the whole place, sell the crutches the previous tenant left behind, and purchase furniture. You even have to unbox the furniture after it arrives and arrange it correctly. I also ended up covering my walls with carpeting, which seems wrong, but I guess if you’re going to carpet a salon, the walls are the best place for it unless you want to stand on a matted bed of shag and customer hair.

What attracted me to *Hairdresser Simulator* was the actual hair cutting, because it does feature simulated hair strands which you can cut and shave. That’s the best thing about it, but sadly, I did not uncover a surprise coiffeur in me. My attempt at giving a lady a nice layered look would’ve ended in tears if she weren’t a vacant-eyed videogame NPC.

The problem was exactly as I expected: whenever I didn’t like how a cut turned out, I tried to fix it by cutting more, which provoked more fixing. Guess I’ll just go back to imagining I’d be good at making pies and tarts. There’s definitely no chance that baking also involves finicky overcorrecting, right? I choose not to find out. ■

MY ATTEMPT AT GIVING A LADY A NICE LAYERED LOOK WOULD’VE ENDED IN TEARS



LEFT: A lot of the tasks are about moving your mouse about.



BELOW: It’s hard to resist spraying customers in the face.



“The kind of game that would have received an affectionate score of 75”

Sampling the deceptively simple delights of **EVIL WEST**

You know that thing where your brain slightly alters any memory it recalls? *Evil West* is the videogame version of that. I picked it up because I've been pining for linear third-person action games lately, the kind that followed in the bloody wake of *Gears of War*. No open world, no fancy level design, no nuanced characterisation. Just me, a big gun and a long line of enemies desperate to throw themselves in front of it.

On the face of it, *Evil West* is precisely that, an over-the-shoulder action adventure that asks two simple questions, “What if the Wild West had vampires in it?” and, “What if you could punch those vampires to death with electrified gloves?” Filled with spectacular set pieces, daft one-liners, and lead characters who are almost wilfully ugly, it's the kind of game that would have received an affectionate score of 75 back in 2008. That's what I initially thought, anyway.

RICK LANE



THIS MONTH
Brought the future back to the past in *Evil West*.

ALSO PLAYED
Death Stranding,
Untitled Goose Game

The opening scenes lived up to these expectations. The first level sees you, a professional vampire hunter called Jesse Rentier, trying to stop a steam train that's ferrying a vampire informant to an unspecified location. This you do in the manner of any self-respecting cowboy, by blowing up a railway bridge ahead of the train. After an introductory cutscene, you find yourself high on a canyon cliffside, shimmying across a precipice while looking down at the train teetering on the bridge below.

TAKES THESE SYSTEMS AND GRAFTS THEM TO A PURE NOUGHTIES POWER FANTASY

SUCKER PUNCH

Structurally, *Evil West* is everything I craved. Mechanically, however, it quickly becomes apparent that it is not a cover shooter. In fact, *Evil West* is first and foremost a 3D brawler, one strongly influenced by games like *Dark Souls*. You're encouraged to dodge and parry enemy attacks while beating them to a bloody pulp using a variety of combos.

Yet whereas *Dark Souls* place the emphasis on challenge, *Evil West* takes these systems and grafts them to a pure noughties power fantasy. Enemy attacks aren't so much telegraphed as dispatched by carrier pigeon, while the parry window is of the sliding bay variety, letting you interrupt almost any attack at any point during its animation.

Evil West has an impressively diverse combat system where you're constantly on the move, switching between ranged and melee attacks. In this way, *Evil West* is less a game unearthed from 2008, and more like a modern game that has travelled back in time and disguised itself to fit in. ■

ARMORED CORE VI

Diving into ACVI's post-launch PvP *By Ted Litchfield*

I would like to apologise to the person I rage quit on in *Armored Core VI*. I don't remember your name, I just remember your build: lightweight on Nachtreiher legs, like I used to run, with dual Sampu burst pistols (buffed in patch 1.06), an Earshot shoulder-mounted cannon, and a laser dagger you would use in a devastating combo with assault armour to eat my entire health bar in a single stagger punish.

I'd quit one or two ranked 1v1s in the past – Alt+F4ing means 'no contest' for either player – but it's a vile habit, especially when your opponent's just about to win. The justification of 'that guy's build was bullshit' rings hollow in the face of my lack of sportsmanship. Sometimes you're the one instantly comboing someone to death, and at other times you're the one getting comboed – that's just how it goes in this bitch of a life. This time, it was doubly hypocritical because I immediately ripped off the build that got my goat.

I tweaked it a bit. The Earshot had to go: too heavy, and I'd rather have the reliable damage of a kinetic orbit drone than the occasional coup of catching someone off guard with the

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
August 24, 2023

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

PUBLISHER
Bandai Namco

LINK
bandainamcoent.eu

unwieldy mortar. Instead of Nachtreiher legs, I opt for the slower but still speedy and lightweight Alba set, with a tanky Mind Alpha torso, Shade Eye head and boxy BASHO arms that send my melee damage into the stratosphere. Stagger, dagger, assault armour, dagger again: this almost true combo feels unfair when I land it on an unprepared opponent. I've since upgraded to an even more cruel and meta-friendly punish weapon in the plasma thrower, and I'm gonna need every advantage I can get if I ever want to crest S Rank.

STEEL HAZE TEDDY

That's what I named my mech, and I'm way too proud of the bit, a riff on campaign character V.IV Rusty's Steel Haze Ortus. When I was going through that campaign, I stuck to lore-appropriate, roleplay stuff, mechs with names like Paladin or Beowulf, but when FromSoftware implemented ranked play in update 1.05, the RP-friendly, campaign-enjoying me went out the window. It was time to get

freakishly into a competitive multiplayer game again – and likely burn out on it before too long.

ACVT's duels are so goddamn intense, an intricate dance of mech combat, zipping around your opponent trying to out-damage and out-stagger them before they do the same to you. Sometimes instead you're up against a guy with 'tank' legs so they look like a centaur whose lower body is a car, clipping around the map because their smart washing machine is eating up their internet, dinging you with phantom explosions from their four bazookas. So it goes.

In the past, I've gotten way too into the competitive modes for *League of Legends*, *Overwatch* and

I TWEAKED IT A BIT. THE EARSHOT HAD TO GO: TOO HEAVY

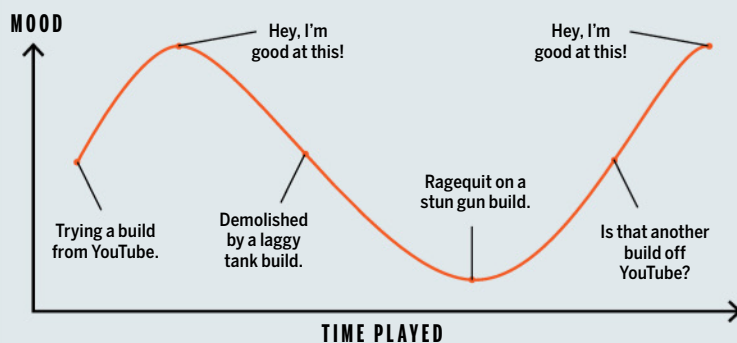
bizarrely *Destiny 2* at the beginning of the pandemic. The adrenaline of high stakes promo matches, toxicity from similarly over-invested random teammates, and my own quiet resentment of those teammates in turn always led me to eventually hang up my low-DPI mouse and return to the singleplayer deals I typically prefer. ACVI has no teammates for me to blame (barring its underpopulated 3v3 mode) – it's the pure 1v1, "me or the enemy" experience I always thought I wanted, but based on a genre I infinitely prefer to the usual bastion of 1v1 PvP duelling, fighting games.

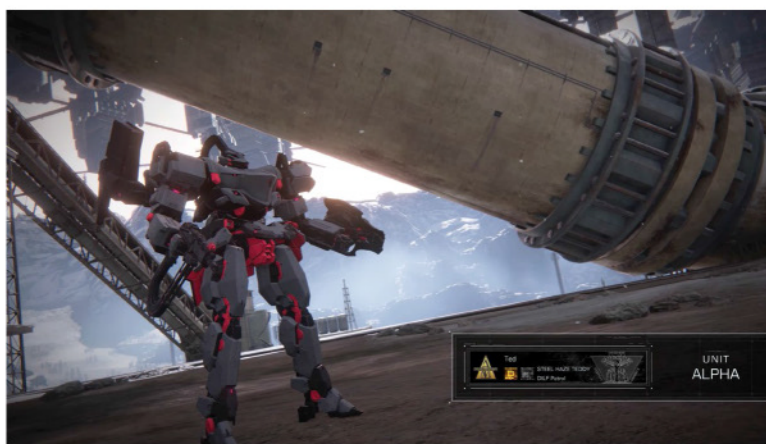
I don't know how long I can keep this up, though: the same intense thrill that keeps me coming back to ACVI PvP also leaves me feeling absolutely shot after a couple of matches, and my slow grind to S Rank just hit a major hurdle: a seasonal rank reset that sent me from A Rank 2 all the way back down to B Rank 3, with the promise of similar seasonal resets in the future.

Is grinding for that S Rank badge, even just once, worth it? It's time I could invest in finishing more singleplayer games, reading books, or even working on my other, healthier competitive pursuit, kettlebell sport. Even as I say this, I know that one day soon, I'll get that urge to pull the tarp off Steel Haze Teddy for one 'last' dance. ■

EMOTIONAL TURMOIL

It's so over/we're so back



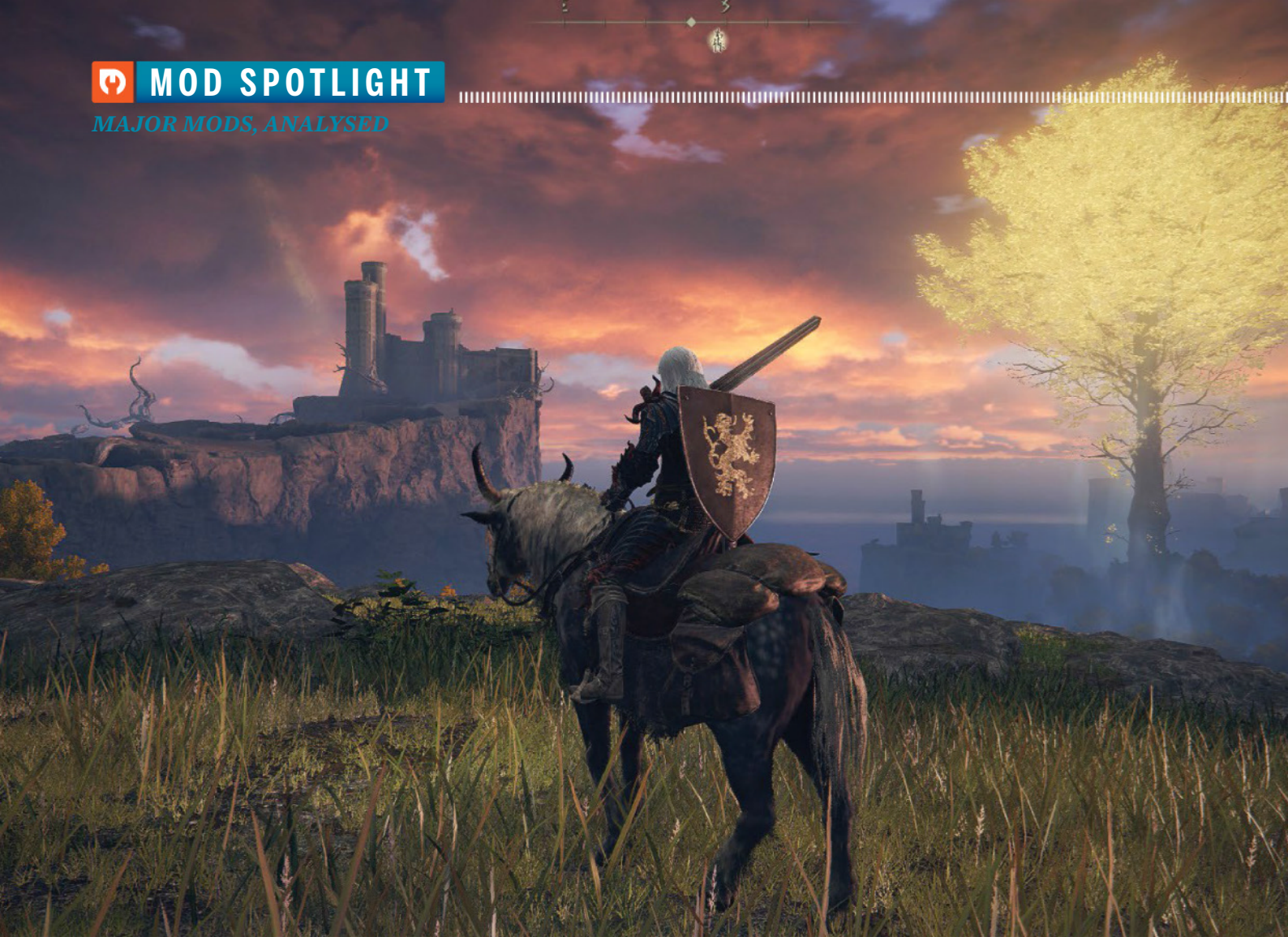


ABOVE: I just loved the look of this player's mech.

FAR LEFT: Steel Haze Teddy, in all his glory.



Nobody else seems to realise you can scan the battlefield and see players through walls.



ELDEN RING REBORN

A Scholar of the First Sin-style total conversion mod for Elden Ring. *By Nova Smith*

Elden Ring *Reborn*, a total conversion mod that switches up item and enemy placements, overhauls progression while adding a slew of quality of life improvements, is like hearing a club mix of your favourite song at a nightclub: the lows are filtered, the pitch and tempo are kicked up a little bit, and it's structured in such a way that the chorus comes in harder, faster and stronger.

The most immediate change *Reborn* throws at you is the changed starting position. Beginning life anew on the Weeping Peninsula, your earliest hours will be fraught fending off ambushes and scrounging for smithing stones, readying yourself for a push into a heavily fortified Limgrave, and trying to get a sense of just how much is different.

NEED TO KNOW

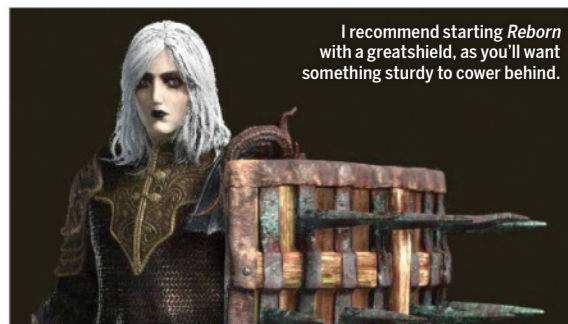
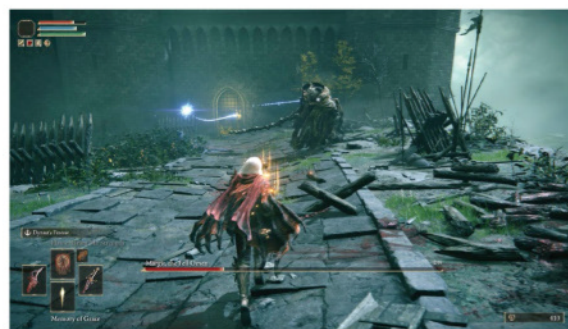
RELEASE
Feb 24, 2022

PUBLISHER
FromSoftware

DEVELOPER
FromSoftware

LINK
en.bandainamcoent.eu

The most impressive thing about the mod is how much it doesn't feel like a mod at times – it has the texture of a community driven *Scholar of the First Sin*, like a brain trust of the *Elden Ring* community's best and brightest convened under cover of night, hatching their own black knife plot to carve up FromSoftware's behemoth opus and remake it in their own image. A real highlight from my opening hour was while dodging the arrows from the greatbow wielding colossus posted up outside of Castle Morne. Halfway through my charge I was ambushed by the Night's Cavalry, and that moment of pure panic as I saw a



I recommend starting *Reborn* with a greatshield, as you'll want something sturdy to cower behind.

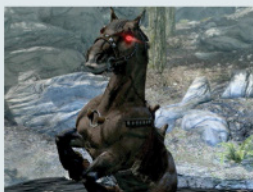
HORSE APPLES

Torrent is one of the best horses in games, but there's some stiff competition



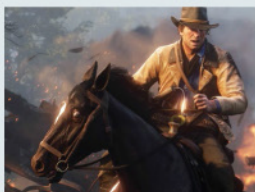
ROACH

The Witcher's mount is not just a ride but an unforgettable companion, even on the roof.



SHADOWMERE

Skyrim's horse has glowing red eyes and more HP than any other horse in the game. Sold.



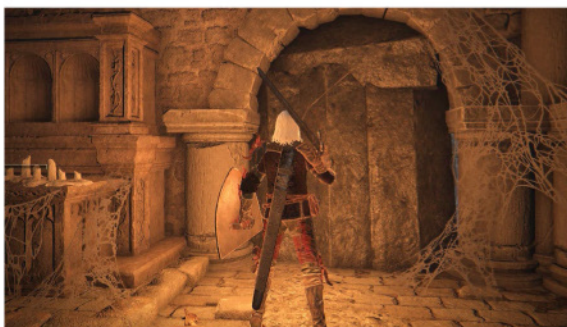
ARTHUR'S HORSE

Take your pick. I'm pretty sure I loved every horse in Red Dead Redemption 2.



BUTT STALLION

All horses fart, but only one horse farts out legendary weapons. Borderlands 2's Butt Stallion.



TOP: Taken seconds before disaster at Agheel Lake.

RIGHT: Roundtable Hold's upper level has a new merchant selling endgame weapons and armour.



black rider barrelling towards me had me grinning ear to ear. *Elden Ring Reborn* is full of inspired little moments like that.

CHARACTER BUILDING

Elden Ring Reborn is significantly more difficult than the base game, but it's also a more balanced experience. Getting my head caved in after one or two hits was much less common, and a more generous resource economy provided me with enough materials to craft more resins, boluses and arrows than I ever did in the unmodded game. This newfound material abundance has changed the way I approach a lot of situations—being able to more consistently buff my damage output and trigger status effects meant that I was comfortable testing my might against encounters that would otherwise be punching well above my weight class. Charging headlong into the Gatefront Ruins on my fifth hour, it was a total shock in the best way possible to find that Godrick's soldiers had their swords sharpened, shields bolstered and lobotomies reversed, my favourite punching bags now elevated to a real threat in small numbers.

I especially love the new Ethereal Medallion system, a currency doled out after victory in any of *Elden Ring*'s boss encounters that allow you to access late-game equipment early, all of which are wieldable thanks to the removal of skill requirements. I missed the train on overpowered blood knight builds the first go around, so I immediately enacted a scouring campaign on all of the early game's enemies with big health bars on the bottom of the screen and grabbed the Bloody Helice early. It's a dream to handle, with an altered Ash of War that confers more invincibility frames than the roll, and the thrust attacks that you can chain together afterwards are some of the most satisfying in the game.

I loved what this did for narrative role-playing, too. Character creation starts at level 1, and is down to selecting an armour set, some mid-game gear, a spell and a gift. With such freedom over my starting build, my imagination ran wild, and I forged a Tarnished counterpart to Radagon/Marika, an androgynous noble scion whose shirking of the princely title foisted on them and predilection for the deathbed arts saw them stripped of title and excised

from their homelands. It's a small thing, but this extra freedom really allows you to inject some real role-playing into FromSoftware's action-RPG formula.

REMIX TO PERDITION

Being able to get hands on with build-defining weapons in *Elden Ring*'s early game really helps keep things fresh after a few hundred hours in the Lands Between, where the early game would otherwise saddle you with comparatively tame arms and armour. My first playthrough, I got the memo that it was optimal to get the Nightrider Flail to +6 before murdering Margit and dead sprinting my way through Stormveil.

In *Elden Ring Reborn*, though, I'm starting to lay my foolish ambitions to rest, as I truly cannot remember the



I'M STARTING TO LAY MY FOOLISH AMBITIONS TO REST

last time Margit gave me this much grief. I'm considering a detour around Stormveil Castle to make an expedition into Liurnia with the hopes of finding some extra Somber Smithing Stones. Of course, with all the changes to item locations and drop rates, I have no clue if the stones are even in the same place I remember from the base game, or if such a detour is any more efficient than throwing myself at Margit for another hour, but that sense of renewed cluelessness is part of what makes *Elden Ring Reborn* so special.

If you've been wanting to begin anew in the Lands Between before *Shadow of the Erdtree* arrives on June 21, *Elden Ring Reborn* is the perfect way to feel some of that wonder from your first playthrough for the first time again. Just be forewarned that due to the sweeping changes that developers Halcyon Project have enacted, you likely won't carry your character over into *Shadows of the Erdtree* – at least at launch. Still, I'm happy to remake Fion the Blood Knight in a save editor while Halcyon eyes up how they can elevate FromSoftware's masterpiece even higher. ■



GET STARTED IN

HELLDIVERS 2

Take to the stars and fight for managed democracy. *Sean Martin*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Hard

TIME
20 hours

VITAL LINKS

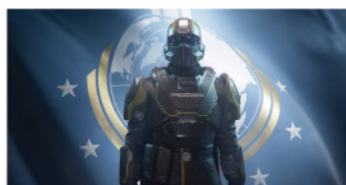
Weapon tier list:
pcgamer.com/helldivers-2-best-weapons

Best loadouts:
pcgamer.com/helldivers-2-best-loadouts



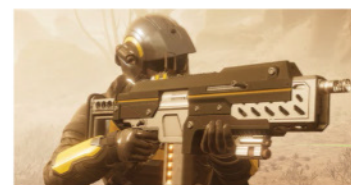
BUGS OR BOTS

1 The galactic war sees Super Earth beset on both sides by Terminid insects and Automaton robots. These factions feature entirely different rosters; the Automatons, for example, have ranged weapons, while the Terminids rely more on swarming you.



MAJOR ORDERS

2 While *Helldivers 2* doesn't have a story as such, it does have Major Orders. These objectives set the playerbase a challenge to overcome to progress Super Earth's galactic war. This might be taking planets back from Terminids or defending against robots.



GET IN THE WAR

3 Your first step in *Helldivers 2* is choosing a weapon. The current frontrunner in the meta is the SG-225 Breaker shotgun, but the standard AR-23 Liberator is no slouch, either. As you earn Medals and progress through your War Bond you'll unlock new weapons.



DEMOCRACY PROTECTS

4 Armour is also important in *Helldivers 2*. Light armour offers speed and stamina at the expense of protection, while heavy armour turns you tanky but makes you slow. Make sure you also choose armour with a valuable passive, such as extra survivability.



STRATAGEMS

5 Calling down these strategic support packages is the bread and butter of *Helldivers 2*; type in the code, toss the beacon, and wait a few seconds for it to arrive. These range from deadly airstrikes, to heavy weapons, to automated turrets.



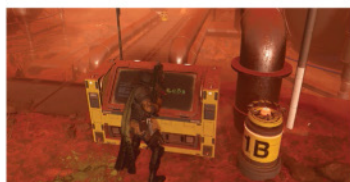
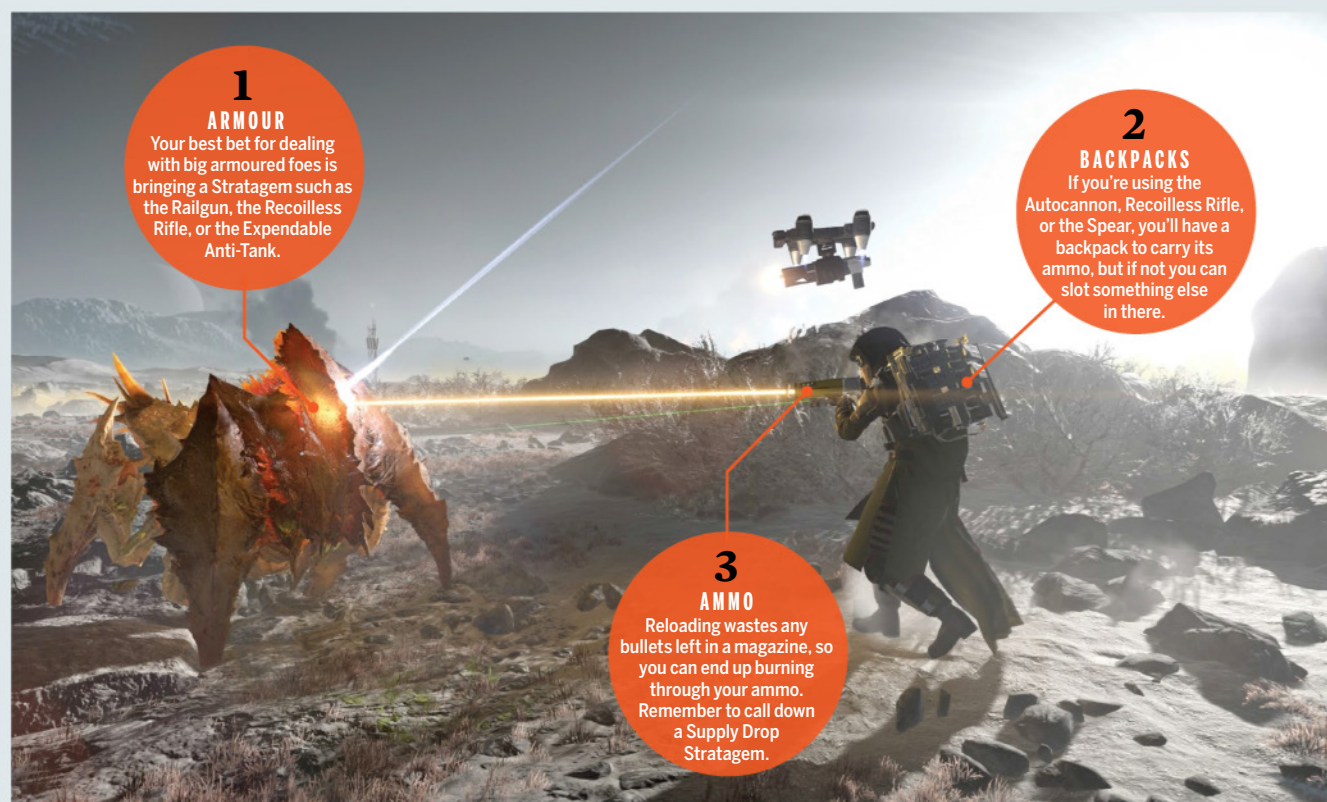
SAMPLING

6 Upgrading your Ship Modules further buffs the strength of Stratagems by reducing cooldowns and call-in times, but you'll need to gather Samples to afford them. You commonly find these plants or rocks at Points of Interest.

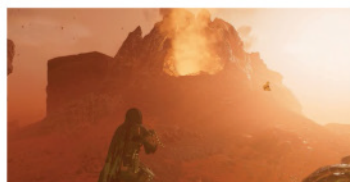


SUPER CREDITS

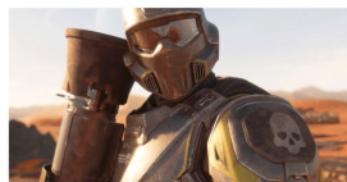
7 Another currency you can often find at Points of Interest are Super Credits – these are well worth picking up since they represent *Helldivers 2*'s premium currency. You can use them to buy armour sets from the Superstore, or purchase the Premium War Bond.

LOCK 'N LOAD *Prep your diver for combat***EYES ON THE PRIZE**

8 If you want more XP and Requisition in *Helldivers 2*, you need to complete extra objectives while out on missions. Destroying bug holes and bot factories marked on the map in red contributes to this, but there are also significant sub-objectives.

**FIRE IN THE HOLE**

9 One way of breezing through objectives is blowing them up from range. Using the Grenade Launcher you can blast Spore Spewers and Illegal Broadcast Stations, and you can drop Orbital Strikes on Lab Facilities to save time calling down and arming a Hellbomb.

**SMOOTH OPERATOR**

10 Requisition and XP are nice, but Medals are arguably more important since they're required to unlock new gear in your War Bond. You can earn Medals by completing your daily Personal Order or by finishing multiple missions in an Operation.

**BOOSTING**

11 One of the best items you can buy with Medals are Boosters. These bonuses can be equipped before each mission, providing buffs such as extra ammo, increased limb health, more sprinting stamina, or even more reinforcements – your number of lives.

**ON THE MOVE**

12 Stay on the move and keep to your objectives. When bots start landing or bugs breach from the ground, it feels natural to bunker down, but you'll quickly exhaust your ammo. Fight a retreat where possible so you can evade enemies.



DIARY

PERSONAL ADVENTURES IN GAMES

GET RICH OR DIE TRYING IN STARFIELD

PART 4

Jett Johnson's final pursuit of paradise is here. *By Matt Poskitt*

The eye of the storm. Not just any storm. An electromagnetic storm that shrouds an abandoned GalBank transport vessel and is home to millions of credits somewhere near the planet of Bannoc IV.

The descent is dangerous, near suicidal. Cosmic lightning rages in the backdrop as the red mist clouds everything in sight. If the countless meteoroids don't destroy the ship on impact, the jolts of electricity will no doubt render it lifeless. There's only one person for the job, and his name is Jett Johnson.

It's been a tumultuous time for our leading star, having been coerced into undercover work against the Crimson Fleet for the UC SysDef. He didn't want to do it, but a lifetime behind bars was never an option. Then everything appeared to be going well... for a while. The infiltration of the pirate faction was successful and Kryx's lost riches presented a real shot at paradise; sipping endless Tom Collins until passing out on a deckchair at the edge of the galaxy.

Instead, what followed was bloodshed, too many casualties and not enough alcohol to make a man forget. Now picking up with the UC military out for his head, the Crimson Fleet covert operation a thing of the past, Jett – just like the riches he's chasing – is lost.

"If that money ends up anywhere but the Key. I'll hunt you down and pry it out of your dead hands myself," yells Delgado, the merciless moustachioed leader of Crimson Fleet. The UC SysDef are en-route to mount an attack on the Key, so it's up to Jett to secure the funds. While neither of the hothead men trusts one another, a layer of mutual respect has formed during their time together. Anyway, all of the credits must be downloaded to a heavily encrypted data core, scuppering any plans of taking it all and heading for the stars. Rats! For now, playing ball is the best option.

Leaving the Crimson Fleet headquarters, an unknown ship materialises. Is this the UC SysDef ahead of schedule? Mathis back for revenge? The family of Austin Rake, or Gabriel Vera, or Larry Dumbrosky or... this could go on a while. What about Lin, the mining boss who was obsessed with Jett's smouldering good looks? Or those do-

gooders Constellation? A message comes over the comms, "Thanks for responding to my hail. We've been trying to contact you about your ship's extended warranty." It's hard not to laugh. Jett doesn't. He breathes a sigh of relief. "I've had enough of this," he says, picking the attack option and obliterating the ship into dust. A small act, but one that makes the universe a little bit better in his mind.

KRYX'S LEGACY

It's a rough ride through the electromagnetic storm, like being on a rollercoaster from the '70s. There's a worrying moment when the circuits take a hit, suggesting

LEAVING THE CRIMSON FLEET HEADQUARTERS, AN UNKNOWN SHIP MATERIALISES

destruction was only mere moments away. It doesn't faze Jett. He's faced death before and he'll face it again. His ice-cold concentration lets him manoeuvre the Kapowski masterfully around the thunderous lighting in such a way that legends will be told of this venture. Then from seemingly nowhere, the GalBank vessel emerges out of the red clouds. "It all comes down to this," he thinks.

The interior is like a maze; not a fun one found at a theme park where you can happily get lost for hours on end, but an annoying one full of long corridors and too many dead ends. What doesn't help is that robot corpses litter every hallway. It's been a long time since anyone set foot on this ship.

An alarm sounds shortly after opening the first vault door, engaging the remaining turrets and combat robots. Like shooting drunken fish in a barrel, Jett dispatches each one with ease. In many ways, they remind him of the annoying robot loaned by Barrett (what they don't remind him of is the promise to pick up Barrett from Vectera months back) making their demise that little bit sweeter.

Many hours are needed to get through the onslaught of machinery (OK, it's closer to 15 minutes but this sounds more dramatic). Then after swiping several keycards from deceased GalBank employees and hacking a terminal or two, the main vault door opens. Inside is the equivalent of El Dorado.

It's a warehouse filled with thousands of CredTanks. "Holy moly! Have we found the motherload!" Jett says, experiencing a sense of pride he hasn't felt since convincing his third wife to put their new condo in his name. Apart from the shine of the CredTanks, the place is dimly lit. A couple of flickering lights near the back guide the way to the operations centre where the download can commence. It's here collapsed in a chair with a pile of credits on the floor where the remnants of Jasper Kryx lay.

Is this a sign of things to come? It's a not-so-subtle warning that shouldn't be taken lightly, even if Jett

THE RULES

1. Take no prisoners: always opt for the 'Attack' option when offered.

2. Sarcasm at its finest: choose the most sarcastic or rudest dialogue at all times.

3. Avoid Constellation missions and instead help out anyone who needs it... for a price.



Time to make a withdrawal.

does pocket the leftover credits. Still having a job to do, the download is initiated. During this, I calculate that the CredTanks must hold upwards of eight million credits. That's certainly enough to keep Jett swimming in Margaritas for a lifetime or two.

Upon completion, the warehouse cuts to pitch-black. More alarms go off, red emergency lighting kicks in and a self-destruct countdown commences. Thankfully, this place isn't a maze to get... oh wait. Jett takes one last look at Jasper Kryx and heads for the exit in a fiery blaze, not dissimilar to the conclusion of an action film where everything is blown up as the protagonist leaps away from all of the debris in slow motion. Beautiful.

ONE LAST RIDE

Before heading for the final excursion, a return to New Atlantis becomes the next logical step to get Jett back to his best physically. This is where the Rocky montage would happen: running around the biggest city Bethesda has ever created, climbing the oddly shaped buildings that make Dubai look like Doncaster and sparring with the alien life forms that live on the outskirts. All of this while Paul Engelmann belts out *Push It to the Limit* in the background.

In reality, I visit the Enhance store in New Atlantis to slim down Jett's belly and add a little bit of muscle considering all of the combat that has gotten him to this stage. While his 'dad bod' has disappeared, he'll always be more Jason Momoa in *Fast X* than Jason Momoa in *Aquaman* – and you know what, he's happy about it! Sure, the drinking won't stop anytime soon but Jett looks good and he feels better. Time to reap the rewards.

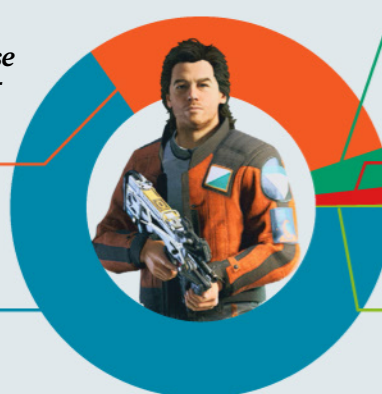
A few scout ships for the UC SysDef circle the Key on reentry. "Just the pilotfish," Jett smirks, before demolishing the lot of them. With Commander Kibwe Ikande in hot pursuit to take out the ship's Defensive

HYLA II

Jett's paradise planet among the stars

30% ROCK
Igneous, metamorphic, and sedimentary rocks make up the lands.

65% WATER
Plenty of water for making hard seltzer.



3% FLORA
Plenty of flowers... for medicinal purposes.

2% FAUNA
Plenty of animals – hey, a man needs to eat.

0.1% ALCOHOL
A number that is set to increase exponentially.

Batteries, the CredTank download is handed to Delgado, who heroically decides to put Jett on the frontline while they crack the encryption.

The final fight, of what is the culmination of one of the longest side missions in *Starfield*, yields an unexpected difficulty spike. Seriously! There are whole Reddit threads dedicated to this mission alone. Along with Ikande's mammoth UC Vigilance capital ship, which is essentially a floating fortress, dozens of enemy ships engulf the space. Ol' Jett's a skilled pilot, maybe one of the best in the galaxy as we've learned, yet this is a huge jump in challenge.

Once the Defensive Batteries are secured, the main battle is carnage. The Kapowski is eradicated in seconds. I'm only on Normal difficulty, this shouldn't be that hard. Oh, it is. I start to get into the rhythm of things after a good few attempts, but Ikande's never-ending army continues to get the better of me. If it wasn't for *Starfield's* reset, that might have been the end of ol' Jett. Not today!

On about the ninth retry, Jett comes up with an ingenious plan to hide behind the Key for protection (or like a coward) to pick off enemy ships one by one. And with some luck – and a handy workaround I found from the web that lets your ship recover every time you stand up – the Kapowski make it through. Albeit, not exactly a courageous story to tell to the grandkids, backup arrives with the UC Vigilance and Ikande himself all that remains. Jett takes a big swig of whisky, and docks.

REUNION

Charging down the halls, it's interesting to think that the last time I was here Jett fled for his life after being reprimanded. Now with the full force of the Crimson Fleet behind him, the soldiers don't stand a chance. At one point I pass some jail cells and have the opportunity to set the captured Crimson Fleet prisoners free. To do this it requires a Digipick, which typically I'm all out of by this point. I imagine Jett awkwardly

BELOW: 'Action music intensifies'.





JETT COMES UP WITH AN INGENUOUS PLAN TO HIDE BEHIND THE KEY

shouting, “Sorry fellas,” before sheepishly leaving them trapped in the wreckage.

Another flashback hits in the Operations Centre, being decimated over and over again by Ikande’s demon turrets and high-level enforcers. A lot has changed since then – namely, Jett’s power level and weapon quality. Before fighting can ensue, Ikande explains that the UC Vigilance is set to self-destruct, “The destruction of this vessel and the deaths of everyone aboard falls on your shoulders.” Jett’s next move could be pivotal.

I mean, physically he’s improved, but is he a better man? Let’s be honest: Jett won’t be a humanitarian anytime soon, though I’d like to think he’s more likely to help anyone in trouble. He might not even charge for it!

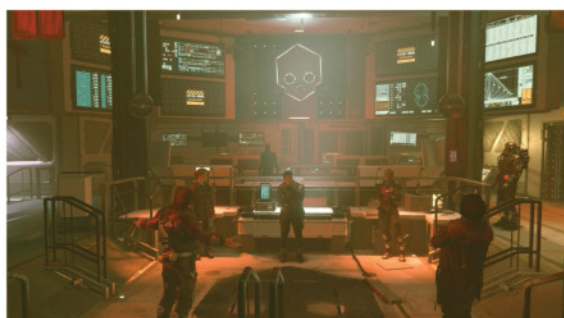
But for now, Ikande is all that stands in the way of paradise and so when the ‘Attack’ option conveniently presents itself, there’s only one choice.

Hyla II. A quiet tropical planet circling the basking red sun of the Hyla system. The air is pure and best of all, an outpost to concoct the most outrageous of drinks. It’s a little more active than Jett would like yet it’s not too far from the Crimson Fleet if he ever decides to go back.

“All right, let’s get down to business. You want your money... and you’re going to get it. A lot of it,” recollecting the words of Delgado. “Drinks at the Last Nova are on me,” Jett replied, a promise he regretted moments later when his cut came to 250,000 credits – approximately 2 percent of Kryx’s Legacy. The strange thing was Jett didn’t care. It wasn’t enough money. It’ll never be enough.

The Crimson Fleet isn’t the family he expected, but it’s the one he’s now lumped with. One that he may visit on the occasional holiday or the winter when his cocktail funds run dry. For now, Jett just wants to get away from it all. He’s seen enough bloodshed for one lifetime. Paradise is here and he’s going to enjoy it. ■

ABOVE: This would make a great pool table.





FINDING A BUILD IN A ROGUELIKE

The joy of not knowing what you're doing until you're doing it. *By Robin Valentine*



RIGHT: *Cobalt Core* plays like a deckbuilder version of *FTL* – to survive you have to refine both your deck and your spaceship.



I'm not too proud to admit I am obsessed with roguelike deckbuilders. Ever since *Slay the Spire* first blew the doors off the genre back in 2017, moving cards around has been my default mode of existence – in the absence of anything else to distract me I will boot up my latest favourite and lose another hour to the decks.

There's a lot of reasons they resonate so strongly with me – I've always liked card games, RPGs and difficult strategy, for example – but playing the excellent poker-inspired roguelike *Balatro* has helped me realise the main thing that keeps me coming back again and again: it's the joy of finding a build on every run.

In most games, your build is something you create from a fixed set of choices. Some games, particularly more in-depth RPGs, ask you to determine core elements of your build before you've started playing.

Though these kinds of systems can work really well for the kind of experiences those games offer, they do have downsides. Having to make momentous choices at character creation is a recipe for analysis paralysis, and we've all had the experience of restarting an RPG over an hour or more in when you realise your build isn't what you imagined. And when all the options are in front of me, I'll often gravitate to the safe and familiar, choosing options that reinforce the things I'm already succeeding at.

In a roguelike deckbuilder, you don't simply choose your build, you discover it. Advancement

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
February 20, 2024

DEVELOPER
LocalThunk

PUBLISHER
Playstack

LINK
playbalatro.com

ONE OF A KIND *A typical Balatro run*



1 Hmm, not much good stuff in the first shop. I'll grab Popcorn Joker for a temporary buff to keep me going.



2 This Joker gives a bonus to scoring face cards! That's a solid start and gives me some direction.



3 With the DNA Joker I can keep cloning my face cards. Everything's coming together!



4 Oh wow, a legendary Joker! Oh, it gets stronger when you destroy face cards. Is it too late to pivot?



5 Yes, it was too late to pivot. I'll get it next time. By which I mean now, because I've started another run.

opportunities are randomised, from new cards, to deck-wide buffs and modifiers, to chances to upgrade or remove existing cards. Whatever plans you started with are likely to be dashed against the jagged coast of fate, and survival means being ready to pivot and grab at powerful combos whenever they arise.

HANDY MAN

Take *Balatro* for example – I might as well, given how much of it I've been playing lately. You start with a normal

specialise to keep up. More often than not you need to focus on one or two specific hands, comboing Jokers and refining your deck until you've found perfect synergy. Or, well, as close to perfect as you can get. Tweaking and changing your build as you go, trying to figure out which direction to head in and what to swap out or keep while ensuring you stay well-equipped enough to keep surviving is a bit like trying to work on the engine of your car while simultaneously hurtling down the motorway at 90mph. One wrong twist and you're wrecked.

You find that same feeling in *Slay the Spire*, *Cobalt Core*, *Monster Train*, and a handful of other truly great roguelike deckbuilders, and it's right at the heart of what makes them work. That constant pressure combined with randomised options forces you to constantly be adapting and experimenting.

It gets you always trying out new things – wonderful for really seeing everything a game has to offer. It ensures you're constantly being surprised at the results of combinations and concepts you'd never have thought of in a vacuum.

And when it does go wrong, and my build never quite comes together? Bah, not my fault, that's just bad luck. Things'll go much better next time. ■

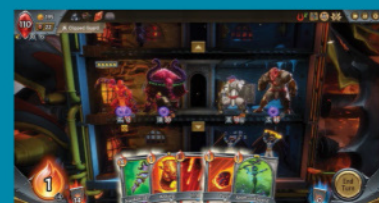
FOCUS ON ONE OR TWO HANDS, COMBOING JOKERS AND REFINING YOUR DECK

deck of cards, and each blind you have to reach a set score by playing poker hands. After each blind, you can visit the shop and buy items such as extra cards, card upgrades, and Jokers. For the first few blinds you're just looking for full houses and trying to beat scores in the hundreds; by the end you're throwing out five-of-a-kinds and racking up lots of points.

If you ever can't beat a blind, you lose, and they escalate fast. It sounds odd to talk about having a build for playing poker, but you're forced to



RIGHT: If you haven't got 200 hours in *Slay the Spire* already, you've got some catching up to do buddy.





GRIM FANDANGO

Death is a slave to the city in LucasArts' last great adventure. *By Ian Evenden*

Beyond death, in Tim Schafer's world at least, there is only bureaucracy. Supernatural mythologies often reflect the human experience, and the afterlife – or at least, one of the afterlives – being a corporate hellscape filled with message tubes, secretaries and filing cabinets that you can never leave until your debt is paid off seems to be trying awfully hard to make a point about our existence. Office drudgery never ends, the ones at the top are the only ones to prosper, and yes I am writing this as my last job just before a trip to Disneyland. Why do you ask?

However, this is hardly the only game to delight in the tedious. The first act of *Return to Monkey Island* involves finding a mop so you can become the

lowest of the low on a pirate ship, while being an overworked bartender is something that dates back to gaming's earliest days. In *Grim Fandango* the feelings of despair and hopelessness experienced by Manny Calavera are not those of a damned soul but of one in purgatory, as he is hoping to work off his 'debt' through good deeds and enter a heavenly afterlife. If it exists, of course. Manny is not above existentialist pondering on whether the Land of Eternal Rest is even real, and whether all we have is the here and now.

Calavera, like most of the inhabitants of the Land of the Dead, is a calaca, a representation of the human skeleton used as a decoration during the Mexican Day of the Dead festival, el Día de los Muertos. The word calavera is Spanish for skull, but this Mexican influence is only on the surface. Below, it's all film noir, from

the double bass in the score to the wide suits characters wear (including a perfect Casablanca dinner jacket) to the smoking (though the manual wryly notes that all the smokers in the game are dead). There's colour and art deco and the feeling of a party, especially as the game takes place on four particular days, each a year apart. It's always the Day of the Dead in *Grim Fandango*, and there's always something to celebrate.

DEAD AND LOVING IT

This mix of influences is a perfect match. The world of *Grim Fandango* is the eighth level in a hierarchy that

NEED TO KNOW

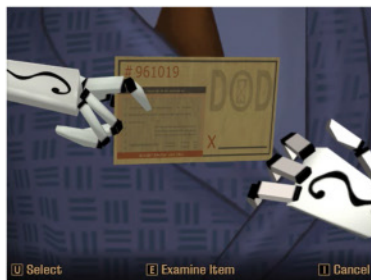
RELEASE
1998/2015

DEVELOPER
LucasArts

PUBLISHER
LucasArts

LINK
grimremastered.com

BELOW: The inventory system feels slow and clunky.



This actually wouldn't be a bad place to work.

has at least nine, the Land of the Dead that newly departed souls must cross in skeleton form in order to reach the ninth Land of Eternal Rest. There's definitely a hell dimension too, though we're not told its number (perhaps Manny is in it), nor exactly what happens in levels one to six, nor the Land of the Living's position in the stack. The way you cross the Land of the Dead depends on your actions in life. The best of us get a train ride, others a sports car or cruise liner. Most are left to walk, which takes four years, and may be assisted by a walking stick as one poor unfortunate is offered at the

game's beginning. Manny Calavera is a travel agent dressed as the grim reaper in a big cloak and stilts to make him taller. His job is to match the recently departed to the travel method they can use to depart further. He has a debt to pay off, his indentured servitude a punishment for unspecified past crimes, and needs to sell more exclusive travel packages to deserving souls, yet has noticed that these never seem to come his way. He's not a bad guy, but he's operating in a bad system, where organised crime has its beak in the bowl just as it did in the noir thrillers of the 1940s and '50s.

THERE'S PLENTY OF SCHAFER HUMOUR TO CUT THE JET-BLACK ATMOSPHERE

You see this in the way he manipulates, schemes, blackmails and lies to get what he needs. There's plenty of Schafer humour to cut the jet-black atmosphere, such as when security guard Carla unloads on Manny about her unhappy life, and he takes advantage of her sadness and self-absorption just so he can bypass a metal detector. The existence of Manny's casino in the Rubacava chapter opens up questions about the world – if all the people here are on a journey to the next world, and are supposed to be walking or taking trains, how do they have time to gamble, flirt and drink their way through the nights? If the skeletal pigeons can lay eggs, does that mean the humans can get pregnant with skeleton babies? Sometimes it's best not to ask.

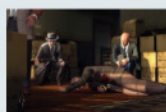


STYLE IT OUT

The funny thing about playing *Grim Fandango* in 2024 is how slow it feels. >>

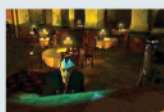
FURTHER ADVENTURES IN NOIR

More games with hard-boiled style



LA NOIRE

What could be more noir than a '40s detective scrutinising dames with something to hide?



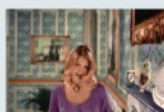
DISCWORD NOIR

This original Pratchett story blends vampires and the City Watch with nods to Casablanca.



BIOSHOCK INFINITE

The style of this 2013 release sets it up for some detective work, then the arena battles let it down.



UNDER A KILLING MOON

Roughly contemporaneous with *Grim Fandango*, its 3D environments haven't aged so well.



BELOW: PC Gamer Towers has nothing on this place.



Movement is clunky, and although you can click twice to run this seems out of keeping with the noir setting. Humphrey Bogart never jogged like he was late for a bus. The walking around and talking, by choosing lines of dialogue from a list on the screen, is the same way things work in *Baldur's Gate III*, but backtracking through the opening building to get a work order that means Glottis can carry out alterations to a car so it can accommodate his bulk and he can become your driver makes for a drawn-out opening, especially as characters say the same thing every time you interact with them. Thankfully the script is tight and snappy, its exposition through words typical of the film noir the game is indebted to just like Manny is to whatever powers rule his world.

Grim Fandango runs on the GrimE engine, which pre-renders static backdrops over which character models move like an early *Resident Evil* game. Being from 1998, massive screen resolutions can't be assumed, so everything feels slightly too big on a modern display. You expect to see more of the world around the edges, instead of being hemmed into a tight field of view with a massive mouse cursor. Ah yes, the mouse. *Grim Fandango* broke with LucasArts tradition by originally not using the mouse for movement, expecting players to use a keyboard, joystick (how retro!) or gamepad. For a PC game with no visual interface this feels like a strange decision, as this more console-centric control scheme is odd in a game that wouldn't see a

ABOVE: The Land of the Living is a weird place.

PlayStation until the PS4. Perhaps *Full Throttle* or *Sam & Max Hit the Road* had it right, mouse-driven but with a minimum of on-screen clutter, a step forward from previous games that took up half the screen with verbs and inventory. As it is, you can search the screen for interactive objects by spamming the cursor about, you just can't use it to walk there unless you're playing the remastered version, and the game relies on Manny's head to indicate their position. Objects too close to others can be missed, and the way they blend in with the backgrounds mean some, like the pack of cards at the game's beginning that tells us so much about Manny himself, can be walked straight past.

The fixed boxy aspect ratio also adds to the feeling of a game out of

LUCASARTS TIMELINE *Where does Grim Fandango fit?*



1987
Maniac Mansion



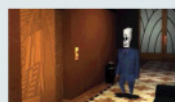
1990
The Secret of
Monkey Island



1993
Day of the Tentacle



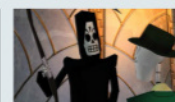
1995
Full Throttle



1998
Grim Fandango



2009
The Secret of Monkey
Island: Special Edition



2015
Grim Fandango
Remastered



time, designed for 4:3 TVs just as widescreen was about to become popular. The aspect ratio is so firmly embedded in the game that the remastered edition's 16:9 mode just stretches the picture to fill the gaps, offering a choice of black or patterned bars if you prefer the original. You're not meant to see more of the world than you're shown, and the remaster respects this decision even if it does make tweaks to the lighting and character models, though this has led to a strange quirk where the prerendered cutscenes look far worse than in-engine moments.

THE NAKED CITY

The backdrops are key to many of the game's puzzles, so you'll be scrutinising them, especially as you

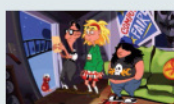
MARKS THE END OF THE GREAT AGE OF LUCASARTS ADVENTURES

try to work out where a particular photo was taken from. Luckily, they don't look too bad after 25 years, and there are some absolute gems in this low-res treasure chest, including a skyscraper with an escape route made of ties, a cat-racing track, and the way your demon driver Glottis squeezes his enormous bulk out of a tiny office that he must, surely, take up every spare millimetre of.

And yet, despite all its brilliance, *Grim Fandango* marks the end of the great age of LucasArts adventures. Its land of the dead didn't attract buyers' souls in the numbers required, and despite winning awards the company moved on, deciding *Star Wars* shooters and *KOTOR* were a better bet following the success of *Dark Forces*. It was game director Tim Schafer's final project for LucasArts, and while 2000's *Escape From Monkey Island* also used the GrimE engine, *Full Throttle* sequels *Payback* and *Hell on Wheels* were cancelled

and *Sam & Max: Freelance Police* looked set to cap the company's remarkable point 'n' click run before being canned itself in 2004. It was a sad end for a line of games that had burned so brightly, but its revival through the games it inspired, along with remakes and new sequels, shows that having the minds who made *Grim Fandango* and its stablemates spread out in the industry was a long-term positive, even though it meant short-term pain.

Playing *Grim Fandango* today, especially if you've never encountered it before, is a funny experience. The initial culture shock of encountering a game that's so unlike its forebears in so many ways, and which will defy the expectations of modern players too, wears off pretty soon, as does the common criticism of having to do bizarre things in the right order to proceed. It's always been the act of wandering around, talking to NPCs, and slowly figuring out the clues that's been at the core of these games. The strength of the art, script and voice acting soon takes over to provide a satisfying adventure through a world that's just as distinctive now as it was all that time ago. ■



2016
Day of the Tentacle
Remastered

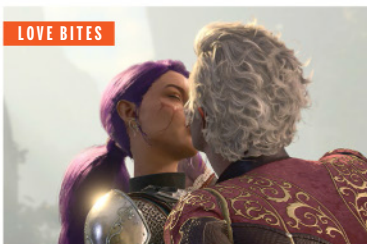


2017
Full Throttle
Remastered

KERRY
BRUNSKILL

People keep telling me I have a passion for retro games, but in truth I'm just not ready to accept 1998 happened over two decades ago. Sega still makes consoles, right?

LOVE BITES

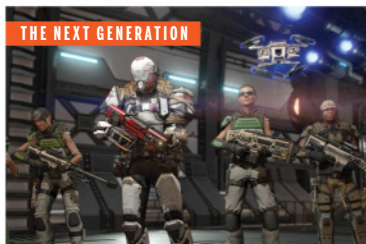


BALDUR'S GATE III

baldursgate3.game

→ As I've now poured over 700 hours of my life into Larian's *Astarion Dating Simulator* I thought I'd use this space to apologise to my husband, who probably wishes I displayed half as much enthusiasm for our marriage as I do the pale elf's "Can I kiss you?" dialogue prompt.

THE NEXT GENERATION



XCOM 2

xcom.com

→ Missing a shot with 80% accuracy even though my gun's literally clipping through an alien's face. Accidentally using something explosive and/or flammable as cover. Assuming that heal can wait. I just love *XCOM 2*'s unforgiving strategy... wait, that guy sounds just like Worf.

KICKY FLIPS



VANQUISH

bayonettavanquish.sega.com

→ Go on, name a game that wouldn't instantly be a million times better if it let you dash on your knees towards a small army of robots and then do slo-mo kickflips off their stupid robot faces. You can't. *Civ. The Sims. Wizardry. Wordle.* Everything would be better with slo-mo kickflips.

BASS LINE



SEGA BASS FISHING

sega.com

→ A lure bobs in crystal clear waters for a moment before being hungrily snatched up, a life now literally on the line. Who will win this intense battle of wits: me, or a fish with a tiny, tiny, brain? And who's playing an electric guitar on my boat?

MUST
PLAY

A PERSONAL LIST
OF THE BEST
GAMES YOU CAN
PLAY RIGHT NOW

by Kerry Brunskill

LET'S ROLL

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS:
CHRONICLES OF MYSTARA

capcom.com

→ Ah, the duality of D&D. Sometimes you'll form bonds with beautifully written characters, sometimes you'll send four weirdos on a big adventure, their heads filled with nothing more complicated than a burning desire to hit gnolls with sharp sticks.

HAPPY HIKING



A SHORT HIKE

ashorthike.com

→ If happiness was a game, it'd look a lot like *A Short Hike*. It's so darned nice. It's a digital hug off grandma. A downloadable facsimile of a puppy's first romp through fresh snow. It's so sweet it should come with a reminder to visit your dentist and brush your teeth after playing.

PINBALL WIZARDRY



DEMON'S TILT

demonstilt.com

→ Rituals, priestesses, giant snakes, eerie laughter and occasional bursts of shmup-like attacks – the only problem with *Demon's Tilt*'s occult action is that it makes regular pinball feel pretty boring. What's the point in getting a high score if I can't multiball my way through the forces of evil?

FANGTASTIC



CASTLEVANIA: LORDS OF SHADOW 2

konami.com

→ A grand gothic castle to explore, illuminated by moonlight. Fights with Death and Satan. Dracula in Sad Dad antihero mode. More blood than that rave *Blade* went to. "What is the internet? Nothing more than a miserable pile of incorrect opinions!" This game's great.



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IT'S ALL OVER...



THE PCG INVESTIGATOR

DICK RAY-TRACING is who PC gamers go to for help when no one else can. This month's case: Dead Men Don't Overclock

She entered my office, as all PC gamers do, with a story to tell. "I need your help, Dick," the damsel forced out between shaky drags on her Virginia Slims cigarette. "My dunderheaded ex-squeeze Sammy's gone and done a hell of a stupid thing. It's our rig, he's only gone and..."

I'd seen this before. "Let me guess," I replied, as weak early morning rays of sun filtered in through my office blinds, cutting paths through the cigarette smoke and illuminating various piles of ancient SCSI cables, GPUs and CRT monitors. "He's gone and OD'd it."

"I told him not to, Dick, I begged him. But he went overclock mad, just kept popping the clocks, raising them higher and higher. He said it was the only way to secure our gaming future, that without it we'd not be able to play *Cyberpunk 2077* in Overdrive Mode. But then he unlocked the voltage and..." She broke down, sobbing.

It was a sad tale and it got worse, too. Sammy, without the steady hand of PC gaming in his life, had then fallen even lower. He'd not only left the dame rig-less but gone and shacked up with the Console Gamer Collective, who'd tempted him with talk of teraflops and an easy gaming life. His life as a serious gamer was over, it was dead already, he just didn't know it.

"You're better off without him," I replied, approaching her slowly and wiping a tear from her eye. "Don't worry, I know a guy, it'll be all alright." I reached into my trenchcoat's interior pocket and produced a Steam Deck. "Here, take this, it will tide you over while we fix you a proper replacement."

She left with a promise that I'd be in touch soon. Lighting a cigarette of my own, I reached for the phone and dialled. "Gabe, it's me. I've got a favour to ask and remember, you owe me."

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